

# POSTE RESTANTE

*C.Y. Hargreaves*



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POSTE RESTANTE

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# POSTE RESTANTE

*A Novel*

BY

C. Y. HARGREAVES

AUTHOR OF 'PAUL ROMER'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III

LONDON

ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK

1894



823

H224p

v 3

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## CHAPTER XXX

### A FAVOUR REFUSED

*Victorian.* Nay, listen, for my heart is full, so full that I must speak.

*Spanish Student.*

THE length of time which elapsed between Léonie going away with Latouche, ostensibly to look at the chestnut trees, and her return did not escape Geoffrey Connisterre's notice. For one thing, his suspicions were wide awake, and suspicion is an evil which defies the most deadly narcotic to lull. It magnifies every trivial detail, sees evil where evil is not, stretches out octopus fingers and grasps at a thousand unimportant things, growing and widening until, instead of a sense of discomfort it becomes a powerful grievance. Geoffrey hardly knew what he

suspected, hardly put his fears into shape, but he was sure of one thing, that he detested Latouche, and that he had a grievance against Léonie for permitting the man to hang about her in defiance of his expressed wishes. This annoyance found vent in what might be vaguely termed a mood on the afternoon of the day following Mrs. Carr's garden party. Connisterre was not feeling well. He had on hand a small commission picture, to which, in his anxiety to finish, he had applied himself so closely as to bring on a headache. It was not his custom to work in the summer, but the painting had been ordered by an old patron, whom he did not like to refuse. To complicate matters, his favourite model had died very suddenly the previous day, and so far he had not been able to find a suitable substitute. Altogether Geoffrey felt in a very bad temper. The exquisite beauty of the preceding day had given place to a lowering sky and a drizzle more in character with November than July.

Léonie had curled herself up on the window ledge, and was gazing at the sky with an expression upon her face as blank as the clouds above. Connisterre was lying full length on the sofa, his brows drawn down in an irritable frown, while Quentin Lee, whose spirits were seldom affected by the weather, was superintending the education of 'Rags,' Geoffrey's little fox-terrier, and making a more or less unsuccessful attempt to teach the animal a new mode of locomotion by use of his forelegs only. Rags did not altogether approve of the position ; but a dog is a foolish fellow, he seldom resents liberties on the part of his friends. The tuition went on, not unaccompanied by some noise.

'When you have quite finished staring at the rain, Léonie, you might try to be a little more sociable,' said Geoffrey, picking up a cushion which had fallen to the floor in his restless movements. 'Is the exertion too great a one for you to make at home?'

'What is home?' remarked Quentin,

before she had time to respond. 'A place where one has a license to be rude, is it not? Home, the world's one free place, the Englishman's castle, where he can storm, and rage, and thunder, and the women can work, and weep, and quarrel. It is a convenient institution. Don't you think so?'

'I think it is deadly dull sometimes,' said Connisterre yawning.

Léonie turned and looked at him sharply. If Claudia had been a sharer of his home would he still have found it 'deadly dull?' Most probably. Human nature is apt to grow dissatisfied even with the most charming situations, and domestic life is not always a bed of roses.

'Give us a definition of dull,' went on Lee, catching Rags by the tip of his tail as the wretched animal made a gallant but futile attempt to seek refuge under the couch. 'Any port in a storm! eh, Rags? but you can't make for one just yet. I haven't finished the lesson, and it is ill-bred of you to rush

away in the middle. Come now, sit up; right end this time. To be dull, what is it? Shall I give you my definition? It is a depression without an impression, mental disquiet producing physical quiet. To be dull is to be unhappy, to be unhappy is to wish you were dead, to wish you were dead is to wish you were at the end of everything—ergo, dulness and death are synonymous terms. Here is another—Why is a stupid young dog like a sheet of foolscap?’

‘Don’t know,’ said the artist, restraining a natural desire to fling a boot at the loquacious Lee’s head.

‘If you put into action the logical reasoning powers with which nature has gifted you, the deduction would be easy enough. Listen—a sheet of ruled paper is an ink-lined plane, an inclined plane is a slope up, and a slow pup is a stupid young dog. They forgot to sharpen your faculties at school, Connisterre.’

‘They did not sharpen yours to the ex-

tent of originating that conundrum,' retorted Geoffrey. 'It is as old as the hills.'

'Never said I did. In fact, it dates from the time when Shem led the first bull pup into the ark, and Ham stood at the top of the plank with a sheet of paper and made his brother reason out the riddle before he brought in his dog. By the way, I saw a friend of yours this morning.'

'Didn't know I had any,' said Connister, who was in a quarrelsome mood.

'He told a lie, then,' said Lee placidly, quite unmoved by the signs of war. 'But fortunately, it was not one of those cases in which youthful confidence is destined to be outraged. I believed him, and as he didn't ask me to lend a sovereign, it was all right. I might have done so to a friend of yours.'

'It would be better to hold on to money when you get any. Sovereigns are not easily come by nowadays.'

'Sometimes they are. I had a letter this morning from that old curmudgeon uncle of

mine who vegetates in Yorkshire, saying the spirit had moved him—he didn't put it quite in that form—to present me with a fifty pound cheque if I go up to him on Saturday. He took upon himself the responsible post of godfather on my behalf, how many years ago? Well, as I am not a lady, I don't mind saying, twenty-three. In exchange for the burden of my sins and weaknesses, he gave me upon that interesting occasion an ivory gum-grinder. Since that one wild extravagance, which was a great outlay for him, and doubtless a source of comfort to me, he has given me nothing but good advice, a cheap commodity which is sown with prodigal lavishness over the country at large. You can have it in any shape or form, size or substance, for the asking—nay, without asking, for there are some people who choke it down your throat against your expressed wish. It is a plentiful luxury is good advice, and I suppose its cheapness is the luxury thereof.'

‘My dear fellow,’ said Connisterre, laying down his paper, ‘I don’t know if you are practising for the hustings or the cheap Jack trade, but certainly your talents are wasted in this room. For goodness sake, if you have got your fifty pounds, go and spend it; anything to take you out of this and stop your tongue.’

‘But I haven’t,’ said Lee, giving Rags a final roll over. ‘It is in the sweet by and by. Monday I shall return home like a newly-gilded Cræsus, and then, oh then, my respected mentor, you can act the part of—was it the unjust steward or his master? Pay me what thou owest.’

‘Is that what you are driving at?’ Connisterre laughed, in spite of himself. ‘There is no immediate hurry, Lee.’

‘There never is any immediate hurry for me,’ said Lee, rather mournfully. ‘I am always like the cow’s tail, hanging behind. I think I shall go to my den now for a smoke; come along, Rags.’ But Rags, whose

memory was inconveniently alert, refused. Lee went out, chanting a music hall ditty as he strode upstairs two steps at a time. Léonie leaned her head against the window.

‘I wish I had never been born,’ she said, with tragic intensity.

‘My dear child, wish something more original while you are about it,’ returned her husband, resuming his paper. ‘That has been the great cry of humanity generations before you came on this earth, and will probably be so for countless generations to come.’

A pause. Then Connisterre continued, with some irritation—

‘I don’t know what has been the matter with you during the last few weeks. If it is a mood, I wish you would give it away, or raffle it, or something. If it is some real trouble, suppose you tell me straight out and let the evil be remedied.’

Another pause.

‘Has it anything to do with that contemptible sneak, Latouche? I’ll very nearly

horsewhip the life out of him if he comes interfering on my domestic *ménage*.'

Léonie started nervously, but she had turned away her face from Connisterre's gaze.

'One cannot always be in high spirits like Quentin Lee,' she retorted. 'Men have moods, why should not women? I—I wish I lived alone, and then I could do just as I like. It seems to me that when a woman is married she has to smile when her husband says smile, and be quiet when he says be quiet.'

'I don't think *I* ever assumed such arbitrary control over your moods,' returned Geoffrey. 'You have everything your own way. What is the present grievance—can I right it?'

'Will you do something for me,' she asked, turning a pair of eager eyes towards him.

'If it is in reason, yes.'

'Then please—I want a hundred pounds.'

‘You want what!’ Connisterre sat up and stared at her. She was standing beside him now, her hands gripped nervously together, her face flushed, eager, expectant.

‘Suppose you tell me why you want such a large sum?’ he said smoothing his moustache. ‘When I asked a few days ago if you were short of money you said no, you had still some of your last quarter’s dividends.’

Léonie did not answer.

‘I don’t wish to know how you spent it,’ he said, frowning a little, but I am curious why you should want a large sum like a hundred pounds all at once. I have never grudged you anything——’

‘Then you won’t let me have it?’

He was silent a moment.

‘Yes, if you can satisfy me as to the object,’ he said slowly. ‘I am not a very rich man, Léonie, and our expenses this year have been heavy. Also there is this Scotch tour coming on.’

Léonie turned back to the window and

stood looking out. Connisterre left the couch and went across to her.

‘Have you been running into debt, little girl,’ he said not unkindly. ‘If so, how much, and where? Don’t beat about the bush. Tell me why you want the money, and if it is urgent—you shall have it in a few days.’

‘I cannot tell you—only I *do* want it. You can pay yourself back out of my money next year. I will be very economical, I will spend scarcely anything after this—or may I have some of my capital, some of the big lump of money? It is my very own. I ought to be allowed to do as I like with it, surely.’

‘But you cannot expect me to let you make ducks and drakes of the money without a word of protest.’ An unpleasant suspicion had dashed into Geoffrey’s mind, and the angry blood surged up into his face.

‘Surely that fellow has not dared to borrow money from you?’ he said, putting his hand on the girl’s shoulder.

‘What fellow?’

‘Raoul Latouche. There is something which I neither like nor understand going on between you. It may be innocent but—it shall end here. You know more about him than you will confess.’

‘What right have you to suppose or imagine or conjecture,’ she flashed out indignantly, but her heart was beating to suffocation at her own temerity.

‘The best right of all, a husband’s right,’ he said with some severity. It is no use frowning and shrugging your shoulders like that, Léonie, you are not a child.’

‘Will you lend me the money?’

‘Certainly not, unless you tell me why you require it.’

‘You are not very generous,’ she said in a low tone. ‘This is the first favour I have asked since we were married, and I will never ask you another.’

Without giving him an opportunity for either word or remonstrance, Léonie dashed

away his restraining hand and left the room. Connisterre made no attempt to follow, but when five minutes later he heard her run lightly downstairs again, and then the hall door bang, he strode across the room just in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of Léonie's little cloaked figure hurrying past the window.

‘Upon my word,’ he ejaculated in some astonishment. ‘Where can the girl be going in all this rain.’

He waited some few minutes expecting her to re-appear—perhaps she had run out to post a letter which she did not care to intrust to one of the maids—but when half an hour passed away and still she had not come, Connisterre went upstairs to his studio, not with any intent to work, but rather as a distraction from unpleasant thoughts. The picture which had been ordered by his former patron stood with its face to the wall on an easel in the corner of the room. He turned it round and surveyed it absently. The work satisfied him, critical though he was,

and even a casual observer looking at the delicacy of colouring and the exquisite grace of the slumbering figures upon the canvas might have ceased to wonder at Geoffrey Connisterre's rapid rise to the summit of the artistic ladder. Success was justly his, a success well earned fully merited, which was likely to bring both fame and wealth to its lucky recipient. He turned away from the picture with a sigh. Twenty-four hours ago the wistful melancholy face of his model had looked up at him from the dais at the further end of the room. Now under the chill finger of death, those lovely features must have lost their glow of health, and settled into the majesty of the infinite unknown; the lips silent, telling no story of the land beyond the river of death. He shivered a little, lighted a cigar, and began to pace the room, pausing sometimes to alter the position of a lay figure, or re-arrange the draperies, but his mind was not in the studio. It was out in the driving rain with Léonie, pondering over the sudden

freak or motive which had taken her out this inclement afternoon. Of late he could not understand her, she was a perpetual enigma to him, but he must take some steps to ascertain the secret of this connection between herself and Latouche, for the annoyance of it tormented him. Another half hour went by, an hour, still she did not come. By this time Connisterre was growing seriously alarmed. She was so careless out of doors amongst the hurrying traffic, so heedless how or when she crossed the street. Who could tell what harm might have befallen her. Unpleasant visions crowded into his mind. They had parted on the eve of a quarrel ; how would they meet? He looked at his watch, hesitated, then began to slowly descend the stairs. As he did so, he heard, with a sudden thrill of relief, her voice in the hall talking to Adam. Geoffrey quickened his steps, ran lightly down, then stood in some astonishment, staring at the tableau which presented itself before his eyes. In the centre of the hall, very wet

as the state of her cloak testified, flushed with a new interest, excited and talking quickly, stood Léonie, holding by the hand a ragged, dirty, famished-looking little city gamin of six or seven years old, who was clinging to his protectress, frightened by the inquisitive glances of old Adam Blair and the housemaid. It was an odd little picture, quaint, even pathetic, but Connisterre was less appreciative of its artistic merit than annoyed at Léonie's vagaries.

‘Isn't he a dear?’ she said, looking up at her husband appealingly, forgetful of their late dispute. ‘I found him begging in the street—cold and hungry and homeless, poor little sinner, so I just brought him right away, and when he has had a nice bath he is going to have some bread and milk and be put to bed. Don't cry, Tommy, nobody will hurt you.’

But the unhappy Thomas, like many another humble individual suddenly brought into the presence of his social superiors, lost

all self-composure. He absolutely sobbed, rubbing his grimy knuckles into his eyes until the tears made channels down his cheeks, and his whole appearance became the reverse of lovely.

‘You frighten him,’ exclaimed Léonie, whose philanthropy was wide enough to overlook such disagreeable details as a deprivation of soap and water would be likely to produce. ‘Don’t stare at him like that, Granger.’ This to the upper housemaid, whose very cap strings were quivering with apprehension lest she might be called upon to wash the urchin. ‘Tell Adèle I want her to fill the bath in my dressing-room and light a fire there. No, you need not be afraid that I shall ask you to wash such a dirty child, but I don’t suppose you would look any cleaner than he does if you had been neglected since you were a helpless baby. Come, Tommy, I am going to wash you.’

‘But, my dear Léonie,’ expostulated

Geoffrey, coming down the last stair into the hall as she made a movement towards it.

Adam, with a smile on his face at the young mistress's charity, had gone back to his room, and the housemaid's colouring under Léonie's rebuke had also disappeared.

‘Do turn that little brat into the kitchen,’ he went on, looking down at the small atom of humanity with some disfavour. ‘You cannot have him in your room.’

‘Indeed I shall!’

And what are you intending to do with him later on? The Refuge is the place for such a gutter baby—if he is really homeless; but more likely the story is a made-up one, and some rascal of a drunken father pulls the wires in the background. Come, Tommy, tell the truth now. You have a father?’

Frightened by the severity of his tone, the child clung closer to Léonie, and although Connisterre's fastidious taste was revolted by his appearance, he could not help admitting

that the child was a pretty little fellow despite the dirt and squalor.

‘That is Christian charity all the world over,’ said Léonie scornfully. ‘If you have a piece of unpleasant work to do, by all means give it into some other hands. You will get the credit of the good action and avoid soiling your fingers. We are all of us so ready to clothe the naked and feed the hungry—in the abstract—but when it comes to a reality, somebody else may strip off the rags and wash the beggar before we clothe him, and he must be taught, too, to eat politely and with refinement or else we cannot feed him. It is a very silk and velvet glove our charity.’

‘Very possibly,’ said Geoffrey, rather nonplussed by the onslaught, but he stood his ground and would not let her pass him. ‘You have not answered my question yet? What is to be done with the child afterwards? Charity which does not take all possible consequences into consideration is a very blind

sort of charity after all. It is no use bringing urchins out of the street one ten minutes and pitching them back into it the next with a newly acquired taste for loaves and fishes, but not the wherewithal to purchase them.'

Léonie glanced up at him, then hung her head like a chidden child. There was more common sense in her husband's remarks than could be quite overlooked.

'I thought—perhaps—you would not mind—he is only a little child, and a child does not cost much to keep. He looked so miserable, and I—I was miserable too. I wanted to make him happier,' she said, moving one foot restlessly about.

Connisterre was silent, but a wave of emotion swept over his face. Something in her words had touched him. Then he moved aside and allowed her to pass on, turning into the library, where he sat down on a chair and stared blankly at the well-filled shelves. He was a little annoyed at the incident, but

his own charity was so unlimited and often so indiscriminate also, that he could hardly quarrel with Léonie for exercising hers in this particular instance. Perhaps had they changed places, and it had been his lot to discover the child, he might have befriended it also. There was the Refuge? Well, there was still the Refuge if the child's story were proved to be true. In the meantime he supposed Tommy would have to remain here. Having arrived at this point in his reflections, Connisterre left the library and went upstairs to his wife's dressing-room. The picture which met his eyes as he opened the door was so pretty that involuntarily he paused. All trace of unhappiness and depression had disappeared from Léonie's changeful face, absorbed in an expression of intense enjoyment with her present occupation. As she knelt there by the bath, the bright fire blazing and crackling merrily away on the hearth, and sending a ruddy glow over the room with all its luxurious appoint-

ments, its cushioned chairs and pictured walls, she looked essentially sweet and womanly. She had turned up the sleeves of her light gray dress, and donned a housemaid's apron which reached nearly to her feet, and seemed to half smother her small figure. Master Tommy, divested of his clothing, his small pinched face rosy with heat and Léonie's energetic ablutions, was evidently enjoying the unaccustomed luxury of a hot bath, while Adèle, an amused and sympathetic spectator, stood beside them, a rough towel hanging over her arm for future use. Léonie would allow no hands but her own to touch the child; such helpless unaccustomed hands they looked too, for this was probably the first time she had ever washed or handled a young child. Connister made his advent so quietly that the girl did not hear him, and for a few moments he watched her unobserved, amused and touched by the pretty maternal way she held her little charge, the wondrous tenderness in

her face, and insensibly his features softened. Perhaps children of her own might bring into Léonie's life the peace and happiness which hitherto had been so far from it; might change the heedless girl into the tender woman. She looked up suddenly and saw him standing there, but in his face there was nothing to repel, nothing of that mute disapproval with which he had coldly acquiesced in her charity a little time before.

‘He has had a lovely bath; haven't you, Tommy?’ she said, lifting the child out of the bath and commencing to rub him down with almost painful vigour. ‘Stand still, dear, don't wriggle so. Fancy, Geoffrey, I don't think he ever had a hot bath before.’

‘And he looked like it,’ returned Connisterre, coming into the room. ‘You have cut off his hair, I see. He is not a bad looking little chap, but may I ask if he is to be permitted to roam about Maori fashion in a

blanket? You can't put those old rags on him again.'

'Oh no, I have sent out for some clothes,' she said cheerfully, still rubbing away.' He would be a beautiful model for you, for see what pretty limbs he has.'

'Most children have. This one is too thin. Come, you have had your way so far, Léonie, let me have mine now. Keep the child for a couple of days while I make some inquiries, and then if nobody claims him, he shall be put into an orphanage. You need not lose sight of him,' as the girl's face fell.

'But I should like to keep him, Geoffrey.'

'My dear, no. The child must be brought up in a more suitable home than this, somewhere where he can be taught a trade and turned into a decent citizen. It is far wiser than half adopting him as you propose. Don't you see this?'

'Yes,' she said with a regretful sigh, pressing her lips to the boy's flushed cheek.

‘Poor little soul, oh poor little soul. This is such a hard world for children. What right have people to bring them into it if it is only to sin and misery. They don’t get half a chance. Everything is against them being happy from the first moment they draw breath to the last when their eyes are closed for ever.’

Léonie flung down the towel, and rolling Tommy up in a blanket, clasped him closely to her. The child’s eyes were drowsy with sleep, but he put up one hand and stroked Léonie’s cheek. A very passion of tenderness welled up in her dark eyes. The touch of that little hand, the soft warm body in her arms, the round head pillowed on her shoulder, had roused the protecting maternal instinct, strong in every good woman’s heart.

‘People seem to think it nothing that their children should be born to suffer and starve and die,’ she exclaimed, a warm indignant colour flooding her cheek as she rocked slowly

to and fro in her chair. 'Nothing if they leave them to sink or swim, nothing if they are brought face to face with evil. Oh, it is an awful responsibility to have children. If they are wicked, is it not your bad training or your own evil example? If they are foolish, have you done your best to make them wise? If they are delicate, is it not through you they suffer? Nobody seems to care.' Léonie paused, choking back a little sob. Perhaps some recollection of her own childhood, lonely in spite of its freedom, had swept over her. Geoffrey leaned forward and touched her cheek caressingly. They were alone save for the sleeping boy in her arms.

'I did not know you felt so strongly about this,' he said in a low, wholly tender tone. 'Darling, don't take such a serious view of life. If we——' and he paused. 'If we have children we can only do our best to bring them up wisely. Leave the rest.' He turned her face towards him, kissing her

with more tenderness than he had shown for weeks past, and then went out of the room. She half started up as if to call him back, but the weight of the child on her arms restrained her. The opportunity for confession had again gone by.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### AN UNLUCKY CALL

Who love too much, hate in the like extreme.—POPE.

A FEW days sufficed to bring to light the simple history of Tommy's vagrant life, and having proved that his story was in the main correct, and that he was one of those outcast atoms flung on the great sea of London life, homeless, friendless and parentless, Connisterre exerted himself to place the child in some industrial school where he would be well treated, promising Léonie that he should not be lost sight of. Léonie acquiesced in his decision more readily than Geoffrey anticipated. He had feared feminine tears and entreaties, but Léonie's personal troubles were too pressing at that time to permit her

indulging in much grief upon Tommy's account. She was moody, ill at ease, and restless, a nuisance to herself, and a decided source of aggravation to her husband, who gave up all attempts to understand her. The London season drew rapidly to a close, and the butterflies of fashion were preparing to take wing to cooler and more health-giving climes. Connisterre had decided to take his holiday in the north of Scotland. The Highlands were as yet unknown ground to Léonie, and their fresh invigorating breezes would be beneficial after the heat and excitement of the last few months. She was looking wretchedly pale and thin, with heavy shadows under her eyes, and a listless drooping air which even the most casual observer must have noticed. Her state of health gave Connisterre some uneasiness, but he trusted that a change and entire rest would make her quite strong again. Léonie seemed indifferent where they went. It was all one to her, she said languidly, when Con-

nisterre suggested various places. Scotland would do as well as anywhere else she supposed. How little he dreamed of the circumstances under which this Scotch tour would be undertaken—how little he knew of the cloud which already had risen above his domestic horizon, but Léonie felt the prevision of coming evil all through those long summer days. The shadow of Raoul Latouche, and of that still more dangerous enemy in the background, whose grip she had not as yet been able to cast aside, haunted her waking and sleeping moments. It is probable that but for her jealousy of Claudia Desborough, she would long before now have confessed the whole story to Geoffrey, and trusted to his affection to overlook what indeed was no fault of hers, her father's sin; but sensitive to the slightest change in his manner, keenly alive to every whisper of the attachment once subsisting between himself and the London beauty, she shrank with dread from giving him still

another reason to regret his marriage, and yet with feminine inconsistency she was doing her best to make the breach between herself and Geoffrey wider. Too proud to show an affection which quite wrongly she deemed unwelcome, Léonie took refuge in a show of indifference so well simulated that it bore the impress of reality, and succeeded in deceiving Connisterre.

The days slipped away, bringing no change in the unsatisfactory state of affairs between husband and wife, and only a short time remained now before they were to leave London for the north. To judge by the pallor of Léonie's cheeks the change and rest were coming none too soon. Her face had lost all its pretty roundness, and even Quentin Lee, usually so unobservant, was moved to remark upon her appearance.

‘You are completely fagged out,’ he said, meeting her on the stairs one afternoon as she was starting out to pay a round of farewell calls, ‘why don’t you stay at home?’

‘I cannot,’ she said, shrugging her shoulders. ‘I must see these people before we leave.’

It was very wearisome, however. The frivolous chat of London drawing-rooms, the social gossip and heavy-scented air seemed positively repellent to her; but she was fortunate at the last house in finding her hostess alone. This was Lady Dene, who had been said to take more than a passing society interest in Connisterre’s wife. There was a very friendly understanding between them now, and Léonie sank into a chair with a little sigh of relief. Here at all events there was no need to keep up appearances, and feign a liveliness she was very far from feeling. As she leaned back in the cosy corner, resting her head against its cushioned back, she looked so deathly white that Lady Dene gave a shocked exclamation and hastened to offer her some tea.

‘I have been drinking tea all afternoon,’ said Léonie, smiling, but she took the cup

nevertheless, and stirred its contents lazily. 'I am destroying all my nerves.'

'My dear, there is no need that you should drink it if you do not wish,' said Lady Dene, lowering the blind another inch as the sun's rays slanted obliquely into the room. 'You are a reasonable age.'

'But it is less trouble to have some one to think for you than to think for yourself. As you gave me the tea I shall drink it. It is insufferably hot outside, and I am so tired. I have been making a round of calls.'

'You look tired. It is quite time Mr. Connisterre took you away for a change of air. Why not have gone a fortnight ago?'

'He could not get away. We shall have two months or longer of holiday-making as it is, and then, I suppose, he will come back to town until Christmas.'

'You will find Scotland bracing after all this heat, and I shall expect you to return full of admiration for the heather-clad slopes and purple hills, and the lochs with their

heavy shadows. It is my native country, you know, and I love every stone and waterfall of the dear old land. You are going to see it under such charming circumstances too. It will seem like a second honeymoon.'

Léonie, who was caressing a big Persian cat which had jumped on to her knee, looked up sharply, as if to detect some hidden sarcasm in the words, but Lady Dene's homely face disarmed suspicion. She had no idea there was anything wrong between Connisterre and his wife.

'Don't you think one honeymoon is sufficient without a second,' said the girl, with a laugh which sounded just a little forced. 'Opinions vary so much as to the charms of honeymooning, that if one had a pleasant time in the first it is almost a pity to risk a second. After all, you know, married life has its disadvantages. Your sins and follies and unwise acts have a dual consequence.'

Léonie put down the cat, rose, and went

across to the window, gazing out at the scarlet geraniums which filled the box beneath her. The afternoon sun glanced into the long drawing-room, shining over its exquisite gold and white brocaded furniture, its marble statuary and vases of priceless flowers. It glanced, too, over the girl's pale tired face, her summer dress with its dainty fripperies of lace and ribbon and the roses at her neck. Beside her stood a tiny scent fountain in the form of a water nymph, the fragrant odour from which filled the room as it played luxuriously on. She took out her handkerchief, dipped it in the scent, pressed it to her face, finally came back, sat down again, and stretching out her prettily shod feet, gazed meditatively at them.

‘I think I am very tired,’ she said, lifting her eyes to Lady Dene, who had watched her with some curiosity. ‘I never realised how tired until just now. I wish some scientist could explain what it is which makes one feel like this. Is it that you lose control

over your nerves or muscles, or what? It is not only my body but my mind. I feel like a jelly-fish.'

She paused, picked up a small book of Carlyle's and turned the leaves over with languid interest. Lady Dene was still watching her with that same intent look. She had never seen Léonie in such a mood before.

'I don't think Carlyle is quite a drawing-room author,' went on the girl. 'I never read any of his until the other day, but he seems to me too straightforward and sorrowful and stern for the butterflies. He shows us all the dark places which we should like to have turned to the wall. Why can't we have our fun without paying for it, and paying such a price too. Why *is* there so much misery in the world?'

'My dear, when you ask that, you ask a question which has puzzled many a wiser head than yours or mine, and driven men into atheism through trying to find an answer. The explanation surely lies in poor weak

human nature itself. You cannot throw even a tiny pebble into a pool without causing ever-widening circles which last long after the pebble has sunk to the bottom. No man can sin only to himself, the consequences of that sin must spread and radiate, infecting the innocent who are unfortunately connected with him.'

'Ah well, a hundred years or less sees the end of it, for personal experience, at all events,' said Léonie with a sigh. 'Old Carlyle thought that too. He must have had a pretty bad time of it. Listen to this:—  
"Oh ye loved ones that already sleep in the noiseless Bed of Rest, whom in life I could only weep for and never help; and ye who, wide scattered, still toil lonely on the monster-bearing Desert, dyeing the flinty ground with your blood—yet a little while and we shall all meet there, and our mother's bosom will screen us all, and Oppression's harness and Sorrow's fire whip, and all the Gehenna Bailiffs that patrol and inhabit

ever-vexed Time, cannot henceforth harm us any more!"

'I haven't read all of *Sartor Resartus*,' said Léonie, laying down the book, 'Geoffrey says it is not healthy reading, but the other day I felt it was true enough to make one cry.'

'I don't wonder Mr. Connisterre forbids you Carlyle at present,' said Lady Dene, looking up from the strip of ecclesiastical embroidery on which she was at work. 'You are altogether overwrought. Put away Carlyle, get a book of nonsense rhymes, and don't bother your head about the sins and sorrows of humanity for the next two months. Try to forget them.'

'Yes.'

'Where are you going this evening?'

'Mrs. Blair's "At-home" and the theatre. I haven't time to rest just yet.'

'Let me suggest something,' said Lady Dene kindly. 'If I allow you to go home now you will racket about until it is time

to dress, so suppose instead of that you lie down on the couch beside the window for an hour. It is not probable that I shall have any more callers, but I will tell Evans I am not at home. Come up to my room if you prefer.'

'No, I prefer this,' said Léonie, going across to the couch indicated, partially screened by the piano, and a huge palm overlooked the garden behind, into which a flight of steps descended from the open window. 'I can lie down here and look at the flowers. This is the very acme of comfort,' she added, nestling amongst the cushions. 'Luxury personified.'

'Then show that you appreciate it by trying to sleep,' said Lady Dene, who was really uneasy at the girl's pale looks and evident languor. 'I must scold Mr. Connisterre for permitting you to overtire yourself.'

'Oh, no indeed, please don't say a word to him. He told me I was doing too much,

and perhaps I have. I shall be all right in a week or two. You are quite sure nobody will be coming into this room. Not that they could see me even if they did,' she added, with a laugh.

'I will tell Evans you are not to be disturbed. I am going to my room now to compare this embroidery with the other; I think its shading does not quite match. You shall be awakened in plenty of time to keep your engagements.

Lady Dene went away, leaving Léonie to fall asleep if she wished, but it most unfortunately happened that, engrossed in her church embroideries and the knotty point as to whether the scarlet of one matched the other, she forgot to give her housemaid orders for a "Not-at-home" reply to chance visitors, and was in consequence the innocent cause of an unfortunate quarter of an hour for her guest, who, soothed by the delicious quietness and sense of comfort, had sunk into a slumber from which she was not easily

roused. An hour slipped away, then Léonie was awakened by the sound of voices in the room. She opened her eyes drowsily, at first unwilling to come back to consciousness and a realisation of her pressing anxieties. A succession of disturbed and practically sleepless nights made it difficult for her to shake off the lethargy consequent upon this short but heavy slumber, and a few moments passed away before she understood that there was somebody speaking. Her first impulse when really awake was to make her presence known, but a remark uttered in a soft *trainante* voice caused her to shrink back and look for a way of escape other than the room. She had recognised the voices of both speakers, Claudia Desborough's musical tones and her husband's deeper ones. The explanation of their presence together there was a very simple one. They had arrived almost simultaneously and been ushered into the drawing-room to await Lady Dene's coming. This

was the first time Claudia had found herself alone with Connisterre since the break-off of their engagement. It was an embarrassing position for both of them.

‘I judged you cruelly, because my feeling for you was so deep that the wound seemed intolerable——’ were the first words which became intelligible to Léonie, and caused her to draw back in the shelter which the palm afforded. There was agitation, distress, almost entreaty in Claudia’s voice.

‘If you will only say that you forgive me, Geoffrey, and bear no enmity for the pain I have brought into your life, I shall feel happier. I have never ceased to regret the words with which I drove you from me—I ought to have known you better. Try to think more gently of me.’

Léonie’s delicacy of feeling revolted against this enforced eavesdropping, but she hesitated to embarrass Claudia by making her presence known. It must have cost a proud woman something to make such an appeal to a man

she loved; to know that she had made it in the presence of a third person would be doubly humiliating. While Léonie was hesitating whether to go forward or feign sleep upon Lady Dene's appearance, which could not now be long delayed, Claudia spoke again.

‘I have ruined your life. Forgive me.’

‘I have nothing to forgive,’ said Connister coldly, and Léonie held her breath, yielding to the temptation to listen. ‘If during our brief engagement I showed such a character as to make it easy for you to believe the worst possible ill of me, then it was my misfortune. I don't wish to cast one word of reproach to you—and for the rest be quite assured you have *not* ruined my life. I have sufficient self-respect to prevent either man or woman doing that for me, but may I ask what caused you to think you might have?’

‘Your marriage,’ faltered Claudia. ‘It is said—you are not happy. I knew—I felt I had been to blame.’

‘Indeed?’ Only the one word, angry, contemptuous.

‘Oh why,’ thought Léonie in an agony of wounded pride, ‘why did he not indignantly repudiate the accusation’; but Connisterre could not trust himself to speak. He was incensed that gossip had dared to touch his name, furious with Claudia for telling him.

‘*Are* you happy, Geoffrey?’ she went on, heedless that her words were in the worst possible taste considering all that had passed between them.

‘I do not acknowledge the right of any woman except my wife to ask me such a question,’ he returned with some passion in his voice. ‘It is kind of you to take so deep an interest in my domestic affairs, Miss Desborough, but you must excuse my saying that I decline to discuss them with you. Shall we change the subject.’

‘You quite misunderstand me!’ exclaimed Claudia, stung to anger by the cutting rebuke.

‘It is not only once that I have heard it, but many times. It is said that Mr. Geoffrey Connisterre and his wife are estranged from one another; that there is a mystery about her parentage, and that he would shrink from inquiries concerning it. I, knowing you so well, knowing your chivalry and tenderness for women, can only dread that indirectly I was the cause of forcing you into a *mésalliance*—that perhaps you deemed yourself bound to offer her the protection of your name. I have heard some—garbled stories. I do not give credence to them all.’

‘It is news for me to learn that gossip has been so rife with my private affairs,’ flashed out Connisterre. ‘I do not know what you have heard—nor do I care, but I should like you and your friends also, Miss Desborough, to distinctly understand that I have nothing to conceal with reference to my wife’s parentage, and I do not think my honour—which bear in mind I value quite as highly as any other man—ran the risk of

being tarnished when I married her. It was not a question of convenience or chivalry. There was no call for either. I married her because——

Leonie waited for nothing more. The words '*I have nothing to conceal with reference to my wife's parentage*' seemed to burn in her brain. Nothing to conceal! A French window opening on to the little flight of steps leading into the garden afforded a hitherto unnoticed means of escape. So silently, that the others occupied with their embarrassing interview did not hear her movements, she slipped away unobserved and took refuge amongst the thick laburnam trees.

'Oh God,' whispered Léonie, looking up at the cloudless summer sky. 'Help me to keep it from him always.'

## CHAPTER XXXII

### A HIDEOUS SUSPICION

*Prince Henry.* Would I had not come here ! Would  
I were dead and thou wert in thy cottage in the forest,  
And hadst not known me. *The Golden Legend.*

QUENTIN Lee returned from his visit to the north, highly edified by his uncle's eccentricities, but grateful for the unexpected generosity which the old man had shown to him.

‘ He is not half a bad sort of Johnnie after all,’ he said gaily to Connisterre, when he had triumphantly laid before him a crisp roll of bank notes, amounting in all to £110, the balance still remaining of that unhappy Monte Carlo debt. ‘ He has saved me from screwing and economising for the next two years. There you are old man, take the

money, and good luck go with it. Now I am out of debt.'

Connisterre lifted his eyebrows quizzically.

'He must have given you more than you expected, Lee,' he said, looking at the roll.

'So he did, bless him; and now just let me say one word, Connisterre, and then we will never refer to the subject again. I know you hate thanks, but I must tell you I never paid a debt with greater pleasure than this. What you have been to me, what you were to me that night, God alone knows. If a man loses his self-respect, he doesn't expect to find it again in a hurry, and when by some preternatural stroke of good luck another chap picks it up and returns it to him—well, by Jove! there isn't any gratitude deep enough to show him. You saved my honour, Connisterre, you saved my life, and—and I'm hanged if I would not lie down and let you walk over me if it would do you any good.' Lee

broke off with a laugh, but there was genuine emotion in his voice.

‘My dear fellow you are making altogether too much of it,’ said Geoffrey. ‘I had the money, you were in a mess. I only did for you what I would have liked another man to do for a brother of mine, so say no more about it. Anything I gave has been amply repaid by your friendship since. We can cry quits.’

‘We’ll never cry quits this side the grave,’ returned Lee, who was sitting on a corner of the library table swinging his legs ungracefully to and fro. ‘Never, unless I can do you some signal service.’

‘I daresay you can—some day. One never knows, and, if so, I know you will help me.’

‘There’s my oath on that!’

‘So you rather took a fancy to the old man,’ Geoffrey went on, changing the subject. ‘Is he the novelistic type of godfather—round, pompous, rich, generous?’

‘He’s round enough and pompous enough

for the mayor of a provincial town,' laughed Quentin, lighting a cigarette. 'And as for rich—yes he knows where to put his hand on the almighty dollar, but I should call him generous though. As I tell you, he never gave me anything but a gum-grinder during all these twenty-three years, until now, when he presented me with a couple of hundred pounds to make ducks and drakes of. "I don't believe in perpetual giving," he said, the morning I left. "My principle is to do a thing generously while you are about it, not dribbling it about every year in five or ten pound notes. Now I don't wish to see you again for another three-and-twenty years. You may come to Scarsdale then—let me see, in three-and-twenty years you'll be six-and-forty, with a bald head and a pack of hungry infants that you haven't a ghost of a notion how to clothe and educate. Well, you come up to see me then and I'll make you another present, perhaps a bigger one than this. Oh you need not look at me," he

went on with a chuckle. I daresay I *was* staring at the old sinner to hear him coolly counting on another twenty years as if it were only three months. Any one might have been pardoned for expecting to be at that time wondering whether his mausoleum were wearing well—— “I shall be here,” he went on. “Here long after you have gone down into your grave, I daresay. There, get away now and leave me in peace. You haven’t found the secret of a happy life, my boy. I have. It doesn’t lie in matrimony and domestic cares, let me tell you that much. Avoid ’em as you would the plague, and now be off. I have ordered the dogcart for the eleven train. I don’t want you to stay later than that.”’

‘I suppose he calls it a happy life,’ said Connisterre with a laugh. ‘Plenty to read and eat and smoke and drink. What sort of a place is Scarsdale?’

‘A gem of a place,’ said Lee, with a touch of enthusiasm. ‘It is in a lovely part

of the Yorkshire dales. A long, low creeper-covered house with diamond-shaped windows, carved oak cornices, over-mantels and all the rest of it. The sort of house to send an artist like you raving mad with envy. His den, or sanctum, or library, or whatever you call it, is a dream of luxury—old-fashioned luxury mingled with new-fashioned conveniences. The fireplace, which looks ancient enough for Noah to have warmed his hands before, is a mass of carved oak with a centre-piece of a brace of birds' feathers, so real that you might pick 'em off. Then at each end there is a cushioned recess with rests for the feet and arms, while, as for the furniture it is enough to make your mouth water! Huge saddle-bag chairs—oh, he is a downy old boy, Uncle Phil, he knows the meaning of comfort—the hanging lamps, revolving book-cases, pipe racks—bah! no wonder he lives in a world of his own. He takes jolly good care nobody else shall live in it.'

'Keep up heart, Lee. You will probably

find he has left it all to you at his death,' said Connisterre consolingly. 'Blood should count for something, and a godfather for more. What about the Pagets? did you see them?'

'I spent last night there. Arrived at four, dined, played billiards with the old sinner, congratulated Monica, who is going to marry the curate after all——'

'Nonsense!'

'So it is nonsense, but when a woman like Monica takes the bit between her teeth there is no holding her. Seymour is six years younger than she is, and looks it every second. Disgraceful I call it, but this clerical mania with which all women more or less seem bitten, has reduced English girls to a state of idiotcy when there happens to be anything in the shape of a curate knocking about. But I suppose matrimony won't make much difference in Monica's life, for she has been buried in soup-kitchens and flannel petticoats for years past; it is only having a legal right to look after the parish. But

I am disturbing you from your letters, Connisterre, I'll be off. When do you go north ?'

'Thursday. I feel ready for a holiday too.'

Quentin Lee went out, and Connisterre resumed his writing. He was looking fagged and weary, sleeping badly, restless, worried by trifles which at other times would not have affected him, but he attributed it to the intense heat of the weather. Presently Léonie came into the room, starting in some surprise to see her husband there.

'I thought you were out, Geoffrey,' she said, pausing by the table.

'I am just going. I have an appointment at four. You know Lee is home?'

'Yes, I saw him a few moments ago,' said Léonie, staring at the roll of bank notes by Connisterre's arm. He picked them up, hesitated, finally thrust them into a drawer in the *escritoire* and closed it.

'You are very careless with your money,' said Léonie, looking on with languid curiosity

as she made use of her hat for a fan. 'Are you not going to lock it up?'

'I have left my keys in another coat. It will be all right until I come back. Are you going out, Léonie?'

'No, I must write some letters. Shall you be home to dinner?'

'Probably.'

Connisterre picked up his letters and left the room. He was already rather late for his appointment. A few minutes afterwards Quentin came in and persuaded Léonie to accompany him for a stroll in the gardens. It was an exquisite afternoon, warm, but with a slight tendency to sultriness; not a cloud marred the sky, only here and there faint filmy lines of white broke the monotony of the blue. They strolled on down Campden Hill into High Street, and spent a few minutes shop-gazing, but Léonie was not in the mood to enjoy the latter, or even Quentin's suggestion that they should have some tea before going any further.

‘No, I want to get under the trees out of this blinding glare,’ she said pettishly. ‘It is too hot for tea. You have some if you like, and join me afterwards. I will be in the Broad Walk.’

As he would not agree to this they went on into the gardens together. Quentin was in good spirits and very amusing, but Léonie listened without much interest until he began to tell her of his visit to the Pagets, when she brightened up and seemed more lively. Since her marriage she had seen nothing of Lady Paget, but now and then in the midst of her pressing anxieties she was wont to look back upon the old monotonous life at Forest Deane as a very haven of peace. If the worst came to the worst and she and Geoffrey separated, Lady Paget would give her shelter. Perhaps it was some idea of this in her mind which prompted Léonie to ask the date of Monica’s wedding.

It was late in the evening when Connister returned home. He had been dining

with an old friend whom he had not seen for years, and the time had passed pleasantly. It was not until long after he had gone to bed that the young man remembered that large sum of money unlocked in the *escritoire* drawer, and was angry with himself for his carelessness. Not that there was any particular call for uneasiness. His servants were, so far as he knew at all events, honest and trustworthy, but he hated putting temptation in their way. The idea occurred to him to slip on a dressing-gown and go down to the library, but natural laziness deterred him.

‘I don’t suppose any one will touch the thing,’ he thought sleepily. ‘I can’t be bothered to get up and see to it.’

When Connisterre awakened in the morning he had again forgotten the money, and instead of, as would have been most natural, going to the library to find out if his property was safe, he went to his breakfast. Quentin Lee had already gone off to the city; Léonie, so Blair informed him, had

breakfasted earlier. Connisterre dawdled over his coffee and read the *Times* until, startled by the chiming of the little ormolu clock, he remembered that it was nearly eleven, and he had an appointment with his friend of the previous evening for half-past. He ran upstairs in search of his wife. Léonie was in her dressing-room with hat and gloves on as if prepared to go out. She did not hear Geoffrey's preliminary tap to his entrance, and when he spoke, started away from the table with a little cry of surprise, almost alarm. Then she made an instinctive movement as if to shield the papers in her hands from his view, but her nervous fingers refused the task, and two or three bank notes, caught by the breeze which wafted in through the open window, drifted across the room to Connisterre's feet.

'You were complaining of poverty the other day, and yet you can afford to have a paper chase with notes,' he said, half-jokingly, as he stooped to pick them up, thinking that

they were the remainder of her half-year's income; but his smile died away when he saw the £20 marked on each, and noticed she had similar ones in her hand.

'I—I am going out to pay my dress-maker's bill,' she stammered, crimson from brow to chin. 'Give them to me, please, Geoffrey. I am late already. I wish you would not come into my room so quietly, you startle me.'

'Is your dressmaker's bill a very large one?' he asked, returning the notes. 'Surely I gave you a cheque for it last week.'

The way of the transgressors is hard. One prevarication is of little use, unless you are prepared upon emergency to back it up with half a dozen others sufficiently strong to withstand the fire of open interrogation.

'I—it wasn't all paid, and there are other little things. You told me I need not give you a strict account of what I spent,' Léonie said desperately, and then, as if determined to avoid further questioning, she made a

little rush past him and escaped. Geoffrey passed one hand across his eyes. A horrible suspicion had darted into his mind. Only a few days ago Léonie had expressly said that she had only a few pounds left of her last half-year's dividends. If so, where had she procured this money? Had she begged, or borrowed, or——'

Like a man under the influence of nightmare, Connisterre walked out of the room, went downstairs into the library, crossed the floor, stood a moment by the *escritoire*, then jerked open the drawer where he had left his money the previous evening. It was empty! A sensation of mental, nay almost physical sickness came over him. He staggered to a chair, and leaning his folded arms upon the back, rested his head upon them. His world seemed to be spinning round. Respect, honour, truth—Léonie. God in heaven! what had possessed the girl so to lower herself? What disgraceful secret urged her on to commit such a crime? Not one moment

did doubt as to her guilt enter his mind. Léonie's depression for weeks past, her urgent entreaties that he would lend the money, the confusion and embarrassment she had exhibited when he had confronted her a few minutes ago with the bank notes in her hand, all pointed to——

He started up, pulling open his shirt collar as if it choked him; he was deathly pale and quivering in every limb. His pride, the pride of a man who hitherto has never had to blush for act of his own, pride in his old name, his unspotted lineage, his honour, dragged in the dust by the woman who above all others should have made it her interest to keep it untarnished as it was given to her! Silence in the room, silence outside save the distant muttering of a thunderstorm coming nearer. Not a whisper of the wind nor the carolling of the birds. Nature seemed waiting for the storm to break.

‘That she should have stooped to this!’ muttered Connisterre beneath his breath.

Oh, the irony of Fate! Only a few short months ago and the future had seemed so bright. Now—what had he to face? He stooped mechanically and picked up a crumpled fragment of paper at his feet. There was no curiosity in his mind as to its contents. He only obeyed an impulse when he did so, but as his eyes fell upon the first few lines his dazed sense of bewilderment gave place to a very fury of passion. Just a scrap of paper, torn, defaced, half-intelligible, but there was no need for more. What he saw was damning evidence enough.

Dear Mr. Latou—— I have the money, and if you  
——in the Kensington Gardens near——I will give it to  
——. Do not ask where I——as I cannot tell you.—

L. C.

Geoffrey clenched the paper in his hand, then went across to the bell and rang it loudly. Blair, startled by such an imperious summons, answered it in person, staring at his master in some astonishment.

‘Is your mistress in?’ asked Connisterre,

in a voice which sounded strained and unnatural even in his own ears.

‘No, sir. She went out a little time ago. I do not think she has returned.’

‘Ask her to come to me immediately she does, and Adam——’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘If any one calls I am engaged.’

‘Very well, sir.’ Blair hesitated, half closed the door, came back again.

‘You are not well, Mr. Geoffrey,’ he said, with a familiarity which his many years of service justified. ‘Let me get you a glass of wine.’

‘I want nothing,’ was the curt reply, so the old man, puzzled and uneasy, closed the door and went away.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### BEYOND RECALL

There is no need to judge you any more,  
Your own mouth, by confession, o'er and o'er  
Condemns you, and 'twill the word record.

CHAUCER.

LÉONIE came to him at last,—nervous, excited, flushed either with embarrassment or her recent walk. The storm during the last half hour had gathered strength, and was coming nearer. Occasionally a lurid flash of lightning shot across the room, followed by a low muttering of the thunder, heaven's artillery, cannonading across the sky. In the half light Connisterre's features looked almost deathly. There was no softening in his eyes, no relaxation of the set lips. He would not falter in what he had begun.

‘You sent for me, Geoffrey?’ Léonie said, looking up at him with sweet appealing eyes. ‘What is the matter? Can I do anything for you?’

‘Do anything for me?’ he echoed, catching her by the wrist so roughly that she gave a little cry of pain and tried to release herself. ‘You have done too much for me already; you have wrecked my faith, ruined my life, and stained my honour. What is there left for you to do now?’

Léonie’s cheeks grew as white as her dress, but she did not speak. Her secret was a secret no longer.

‘Where have you been this morning?’ he went on, still holding her in that vice-like grip. ‘But I need not ask. You have been with that damned scoundrel, Latouche. *Will* you speak?’

‘I am not going to tell you a lie,’ she said, facing him, pale but resolute. ‘I *have* been with him—yes, but it is for the last time, Geoffrey.’

‘You are making a virtue of necessity now by a pretence that your confession is spontaneous and not because of my discovery,’ he said scornfully. ‘Great Heaven! how you can have the audacity to stand there and look me in the face, when you must know I have found out everything, is beyond my comprehension. I have trusted you—trusted you in spite of a hundred things which might have aroused a hateful suspicion in the mind of another man, and how have you repaid this confidence? Look at that——’ Connisterre struck his hand upon the scrap of paper. ‘What is this secret for which you are paying hush money? I insist upon knowing. Money taken from this room without my sanction! Good God! that I should have to say it to my wife, *stolen* from me. Have I not been generous to you; have I grudged you anything? Would I not rather have given you the money ten times over than this should have happened? What devil tempted you? Speak, cannot you, and confess all.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ she gasped, looking at him with horror and dread in her eyes. ‘Is it the money? Yes, I gave him some; I couldn’t help. Don’t ask me any more questions, Geoffrey. I will never have a secret from you again, and I did not know this one when we married. Be kind, be generous. You loved me once, try to love me still. Don’t you remember telling me in the picture gallery at Forest Deane that if ever you were unkind to me, I must remind you of your promise. Oh! Geoffrey, I am so unhappy.’ She was clinging to him now, sobbing like a child. Without using brutal force he could not shake her off.

‘Listen,’ she went on through her tears, ‘I know you love her still, I know you are sorry that you married me, but I will try to be a better wife, don’t send me away, care for me a little still.’

‘Care for you still,’ he exclaimed, trying to free himself from those clinging arms. ‘What do you take me for—a block of wood

or flesh and blood? care for you when you have outraged every sentiment, when not content with hoodwinking me in fifty different ways, you could stoop so low as to steal money for some secret purpose of your own. I will never forgive you.'

'Steal what?' Léonie pushed him from her and started back. Her voice was full of horror. Outside the storm was at its height, the thunder roaring like cannon, the lightning playing in vivid streaks across the room.

'The money,' he repeated, looking at her fiercely. 'The money which Lee gave to me yesterday, and which I put away unlocked in that drawer. It is gone. Don't trouble to deny it. There is proof enough.' Connisterre tossed the paper to her, but Léonie made no movement to pick it up.

'You must be mad,' she exclaimed, pushing back the hair from her brow, while a flood of angry colour chased away her pallor. '*I* take the money, *I* steal it out of the drawer? I—oh, how dare you speak to me

like that, accuse me, your wife, of theft. How dare you even suggest such a thing. Has respect for me ceased with your love?' Léonie was transformed in one second from an excited sobbing child to an incensed woman quivering under a deadly outrage, and all her pride was up in arms to resent the insult. Such passion may well sweep away love for a time.

'How dare you,' she repeated. Her eyes were ablaze with passion looking fearlessly into his.

'Then explain that,' exclaimed Connisterre, laying his hand upon the paper which lay between them. 'Is my suspicion quite unjustifiable? You come to me days ago praying for money as if it were a boon for which you would sell your life. This morning I find you in possession of a large sum for which you will not account; you are nervous, embarrassed, trying to conceal it——' he stopped, startled by the livid glare of lightning which at that moment seemed to

rend the sky in two, and flooded the long room like a stream of fire.

‘I come down here,’ he went on, recovering himself, ‘and I find that the money placed in the drawer here, of which you alone were cognisant, has disappeared, and I also find—this. What further proof do I require to point to your guilt?’ The crack of thunder drowned his voice, but when the roar had died away, and he would have spoken again, Léonie stopped him with an imperious gesture.

‘Hush!’ she said in a voice so cold and composed, that it came upon him like a shock after her recent excitement. ‘You have said quite enough. Let me speak now. You do not ask *if* I have done this thing, you do not give me the benefit of the doubt. Had you wished to kill my love for you—I suppose you did—you could have found no better way. I will never overlook it, never forgive you. Something, however, there is which you have a right to know, though to save

you pain I was content to sacrifice much. Had I known it a year ago I never would have married you, but now it is too late to remedy that. It is no fault of mine—only a misfortune.'

'I do not understand you,' said Connisterre, leaning heavily against the table.

'Perhaps not; but I will explain in a little time. No, don't speak to me, don't touch me,' as he made a movement to lay his hand upon her shoulder. 'I want to be alone, I want to think.' Before he could prevent her she left the room.

The storm had ceased. Only the heavy pattering of the rain outside upon the pavement testified to the severity with which the elements had discharged their fury. In the house all was still, while the time dragged slowly on, and the fingers of the little clock on the library mantel-shelf moved round with steady precision. After the storm a calm, and after the calm, the still small voice of conscience. That voice was whispering to

Geoffrey Connisterre now as he sat on in the silence, whispering to him how and where he had failed in his duty to the girl whom he had made his wife. He remembered her as she had been in the days of their brief engagement, their early married life, loving, gay, light-hearted; remembered the passionate devotion which she had lavished upon him, a devotion, alas! which he had fallen so far short of appreciating at its true value. Had he not in the pursuit of art, in his thousand and one interests, his absorption in studio life, thrown her back upon herself? Had he been tender to her, sympathetic, unforgetful of her youth and inexperience? And this unhappy secret between them? surely if he had pleaded for her confidence with the tenderness of a lover and the gentle authority of a husband, all might still have been well with them. She had asked for bread, he had given her a stone; he had flattered himself that his name and protection were an adequate return for her impulsive love, and now

that he was in danger of losing it, every instinct of nature rose up to war against the deprivation. We never realise half the value of our possessions until there seems to be a risk of losing them. Connisterre only discovered how unconsciously he had valued Léonie's adoration, when she left him with those bitter words upon her lips. He believed in her innocence. No suspicion could have lived under the indignant fire of those dark eyes. Denial was superfluous. He knew he had wronged her, wronged her beyond forgiveness. What would be the end of it all? in what words could he express his contrition for the insult? There might be some excuse for him; suspicion had pointed against her, even trivial incidents had assumed an alarming significance, but he might have given her the benefit of the doubt, might have hesitated to cast such a slur upon her honour. As he sat there regardless of the flight of time or the appointment with his friend, Adam came to tell him that the

luncheon gong had sounded half an hour before, but that his mistress had gone out, and had not yet returned.

‘I will wait for her,’ said Connisterre, making a pretence of picking up the paper.

The time crept on, two o'clock came, then three, but still no Léonie. Geoffrey got up and walked restlessly about the room, looking from time to time at his watch. His eyes ached, his head seemed in a whirl, he found himself unable to think connectedly. Should he go out, or lie down, or—— yes, he would go to his dressing-room and have a cold bath. The heat was insupportable. He left the library, and walked heavily upstairs. As he entered his dressing-room his eyes fell upon a letter directed to him in Léonie's writing, and placed in so conspicuous a position that it could not be overlooked. Instinct told Geoffrey what it contained. His wife had left him. He tore it open with unsteady fingers, and tried to read, but the words danced up and down like fireflies. He made

two futile attempts, put the letter down, and went across the room to where he kept his brandy flask. He must steady his nerves somehow. Now, what was it she had to say to him.

*‘After what has passed you cannot expect me to live with you,’ wrote Léonie in the bitterness of her spirit. ‘I will never forgive you, never speak to you again. Once I thought that if I had to separate myself from you I should not care to live ; but now all I ask is, that I may not see you again. I think you have killed my love and all that is good in my nature. It almost seems that I lower myself by denying the hateful charge which you have brought against me, but in justice to myself I must do it. I would have scorned to touch one farthing of any money which was not my own. I do not know who took it, only I am innocent. But now, as this is the last time I shall write to you, I am going to tell you all. When you brought Raoul Latouche to the Grand Hotel in Paris, I was foolish enough to pretend that we had never met before. That was not true. He had been an acquaintance of my father’s a few years before, and once I had borrowed money from him. My hatred and contempt for him were so great that*

*I dreaded you should know we were not strangers. It was silly, unpardonably silly, but it is past. You remember we went afterwards to the Bois de Boulogne? It was there, while you and your friends were separated from us, that he told me a secret which I had not known before, and which filled me with shame and horror. You will have to learn it, and I—I who once thought that at the risk of everything I must keep it from you, tell it now without any other emotion except one of relief. I no longer care what you think of me. The simple truth is, that years ago, in his young days, my father was imprisoned for forgery, and after his release was sent abroad as an exile, cut off from every family tie. It is a disgraceful story; it has soiled your good name, but the fault is not mine. I would never have married you knowing it, and I was sick with shame and horror when Mr. Latouche told me. I loved you so much that I dreaded even the mere idea of separation, for it might come to that. You are proud—you remember saying that one who disgraced your name would have to leave you. I felt I would rather die than do this. To face your scorn, and anger, and contempt was beyond my courage. Mr. Latouche told me there was only one*

other person who knew the secret, and that he would probably, for a money consideration, keep silence. I was desperate, I besought him to try what could be done. This other man knew I was married to you—knew also the gossip which this scandalous story spread abroad in London circles would cause. We came back to London, and you wondered why I was unhappy. How could I be anything else with this wretched secret to keep? At Mrs. Carr's garden party I met Mr. Latouche again, and he told me then, while we were down by the river, that he had seen this man, and had made him promise that for a hundred pounds now, and another hundred six months hence, he would keep his counsel. What was I to do? I dared not tell you all—you refused to lend me the money. There was only one alternative—to sell my pearl necklace. It went to my heart to do so, but there was no alternative else. I sold it yesterday to Lee and Carron for nearly the amount I required. I had some money—a little, which made up the sum. That was the money you saw me with this morning. I was going to meet Mr. Latouche in the Broad Walk. Now you know all. I am reckless. It is nothing to me that I have sacrificed so much in vain, for I have lost the only

*thing which was ever of value to me—your love—and I tell you frankly you have killed mine. Such an accusation as you hurled at me an hour ago is not easily forgiven. Why did you marry me when you were heart and soul in love with another woman? Was it pity, or pique, or fancied affection? I do not know, and I do not care. Only let us live the end of our lives apart. I am going to Lady Paget. She will give me a home for a little while, and you may tell the world what story you please. Only remember this—With you I will not live.—LÉONIE.*

The letter dropped from Connisterre's trembling fingers. The girlish pathos of her frank confession had touched him to the quick. What she must have suffered during the last few weeks of anxiety and dread Geoffrey realised in full. That loving, passionate, impulsive soul of hers had drunk the cup of sorrow to its depths. Flung back upon herself by his indifference, hardened by jealousy, filled with shame at the sense of her father's disgrace, what wonder that her

husband's insulting accusation had been as the last straw to the burden she carried, turning her away from him with loathing and contempt. For one moment the impulse was strong in Connisterre to follow his wife, and plead for her forgiveness—the next he realised its hopelessness. In every line of the letter before him he read a proud resolve. It was no blind impulse of childish anger ; was it rather the just resentment of a deeply injured woman? He could not go to her yet. He must write, and trust to time to narrow the breach between them. But there was one thing still left that he could do, and as he thought of this, a savage fire gleamed in Connisterre's eyes. Civilisation, conventionalism, courtesy—all were swept away in a fury of hate and the swift longing which possessed him to take vengeance upon his enemy. Nothing should stop him now. Crushing the fatal letter in his pocket, he ran downstairs into the hall, and after a brief hesitation selected from amongst a

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number of others a light riding whip. Carefully concealing this under his summer overcoat, he went out into the still heavily falling rain in search of Raoul Latouche.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### A SUMMARY VENGEANCE

Be wary, be prepared for every case,  
All day men meet in unexpected place.

CHAUCER.

RAOUL LATOUCHE, seated in his bachelor chambers not a stone's throw from St. James Street, and grumbling at the rain which had unexpectedly detained him a prisoner, was startled by the abrupt entrance of Geoffrey Connisterre, whose liberal *douceur* to the man at the door had obtained him the privilege of an unannounced entry.

‘Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Connisterre,’ said Latouche, holding out his hand cordially. ‘I did not hear you come in. What will you take to drink—claret, sherry, soda——?’

‘Suppose you delay offering me your

hospitality until I have stated the object of my visit,' interrupted the artist, not availing himself of the chair which Latouche obligingly pushed forward.

'As you please,' said Raoul with apparent indifference, but his colour changed, and he glanced apprehensively towards the closed door. A bully is invariably a coward at heart, and there was something not very reassuring in Connisterre's aspect.

'I believe I have a long score to settle with you,' went on Geoffrey, cool as ice now that the crisis had come. 'First of all, I have to thank you for the infamous story which you carried to Miss Desborough with reference to my doings at Monte Carlo, and which resulted, as you well know, in the break-off of my engagement. But that is not all. By what system of scoundrelism have you been blackmailing my wife, you contemptible coward?'

'Take yourself out of my room,' stormed Latouche jumping up, crimson with passion.

‘Not until it suits me. Now, listen. I no more believe in this trumped-up story about some man demanding money through you to keep secrecy as to my father-in-law’s crimes, than I believe in your honesty. I know the manner of your life, your liabilities, the shifts to which you are put to procure money. You extorted it from my wife for yourself only, you miserable cur, but you did not count upon having to reckon with me.’

‘Look here, if you give me any more insolence, Mr. Geoffrey Connisterre, I’ll have you kicked downstairs,’ blurted Latouche, making towards the bell.

Connisterre stepped in front of him and smiled contemptuously.

‘No, you don’t,’ he said, unbuttoning his coat. ‘There is only one way in which to appeal to a man of your calibre. Your heart is as hard as a nether millstone, but your skin is as soft as that of most men, and I will make you know it before I finish.’ He took the whip from beneath his coat,

stripping it through his fingers with savage enjoyment in the expression of craven fear upon Latouche's face.

‘If you dare lay a finger on me I'll bring you up in court, and blazon abroad the fact that your father-in-law was a felon,’ shouted Raoul, while great beads of perspiration stood upon his brow. ‘What do you mean by breaking into a man's private rooms and blackguarding him in this fashion? You——’

‘I mean just this,’ thundered Connisterre, catching him by the collar.

The contest was an unequal one. In height, muscle, and general physique, Connisterre was far more than a match for his antagonist. Latouche's slender form, weakened by the excesses of an ill-spent life, was like a reed in his grip, helpless, writhing, altogether at his mercy. Geoffrey meant to make an example of him, to take full retribution for all his injuries. Shouts and oaths and struggles on the part of his victim were

alike unavailing. Not until his own arm ached with the violence of the punishment he had meted out did Geoffrey pause, then relaxing his grip he flung Latouche from him with some force across the floor. He was out of breath, panting, exhausted, but there was a glow of satisfaction upon his face.

‘I will make you pay for this,’ gasped Latouche, hardly able to articulate the words through excess of pain. ‘Not a corner of London but shall ring with your domestic scandals and that Monte Carlo story over which you choose to throw——’

‘Hold your cursed tongue,’ exclaimed Connisterre between his teeth, and he stooped down until his face was on a level with that of the wretched man at his feet. ‘I have still another card to play. Bring me into notoriety if you like, take your scurrilous tales in every highway, but remember this, my knowledge of your past is no elementary one. Dare to utter a word against me or my wife, and the next day sees you kicked out of every club

and all decent London society. Do you think I don't know of a certain dark episode in your life which, if published, would bring you imprisonment for fraud. Take care that you don't drive me to do it.'

He waited for an answer but none came. Physically and mentally the man was at his mercy, and after one more contemptuous glance Connisterre left him and went out into the rain.

There is, I suppose, a certain satisfaction in the accomplishment by brute force of what the law would deny us, and it speaks well for man's self-control that he is not oftener tempted to redress an injury in this way. Before the era of civilisation dawned, nature had gifted her children with thews and sinews for the protection of individual rights, and sometimes it is gratifying to use them—especially when it is against some cowardly, skulking wretch whom the law, far reaching as it is, cannot touch. But after the excitement has died away, and the glow of satisfac-

tion faded, there is apt to be the sting of shame left behind. No man, unless he is lower than the animals, rejoices to inflict physical pain upon another, and also, we are sometimes a little disgusted at having lost our self-control. It is humiliating. There were, however, too many anxieties pressing upon Connisterre's mind as he walked home to Campden Hill to permit of Latouche's possible suffering making one of them.

‘The fellow has only got his just deserts, he muttered, letting himself into the house with a latch key. ‘I am glad I had an opportunity of giving him a taste of the horse-whip, despicable rascal. He deserves hanging.’ Then he went on upstairs to his room and tried to disentangle the web into which his domestic affairs had twisted themselves. For the present Léonie was safe under Lady Paget's care. He must go to her later on and plead for forgiveness. Would she readily grant it? He feared not. There was still the mystery of the stolen notes to solve, but

he had no longer reason to doubt his wife. He believed her statement implicitly, and Geoffrey's first resolve was to buy back that much valued necklace from the jewellers, no matter at what sacrifice. By whose agency then had the money disappeared? The mystery caused him some discomfort. He could hitherto have staked much on the honesty of his servants, but now an unpleasant doubt had arisen in his mind. He must, for his own satisfaction, trace the thief, but it was necessary to go about his investigations secretly lest Léonie's hasty departure might connect itself somehow with the loss, and cause gossip amongst his servants. Taking things altogether, life was just now a very thorny path for Geoffrey Connisterre to tread, and he could not at present see any lightening of the clouds which surrounded him.

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Quentin Lee, who had retired to bed in a state of healthy fatigue induced by a long

pull on the river, and a hardly fought-out set at tennis, was oddly wakeful and restless, sometimes dropping off into a light slumber, sometimes turning and tossing from side to side with extreme discomfort. He could not account for it. He was perplexed, irritated, finally very savage indeed.

‘What *is* the matter with me,’ he exclaimed at last, sitting bolt upright in bed rubbing his eyes drowsily. ‘Here am I tired as a dog, and can’t get a wink of sleep. Hang it all, I might as well get up and go for a walk.’ It was an exquisite moonlight night, and a silvery brightness flooded every corner of the long room, weaving patterns on the polished floor. Through the open window Quentin could see the roof and gables of the opposite house, silhouetted against the white background of the moon’s powerful gleams. A prowling cat on her way to some unholy festival paused a moment on the window ledge, and gazed in, arching her back and looking disagreeably large in the weird light. In

the distance rose a faint chorus of shrieks from the rendezvous to which she was bound.

‘Get away, you beast,’ exclaimed Quentin, flinging a railway novel at her with such precision that it caught the tip of her tail and fell into the street below. Then, relieved by this ebullition of ill-temper, he lay down again, but not to sleep, for a few minutes later he heard a step in the library below, a quiet, careful step, as of some one moving about who did not wish to be discovered. Lack of physical courage was not one of Quentin Lee’s faults. In an instant he was out of bed, had slipped on some clothes, and armed only with a heavy stick, went cautiously out on to the landing. He was unwilling to disturb Connisterre, whose pallor and evident distress during dinner had moved him to silent pity and wonderment. He knew nothing of the domestic upheaval which had taken place during the day, but he suspected there was something wrong. Connisterre had briefly

remarked that Léonie had gone away to spend a few days with the Pagets, and had then left Quentin to conjecture what he chose. They both retired to bed early, but Quentin so far had not been able to sleep. Shielding the light with one hand, he went quietly downstairs. How the boards creaked beneath his feet, and what ghostly noises they made in the silent house. What an odd effect the moonlight had too, streaming in through the landing windows and the fan-light above the door. It looked eerie and desolate somehow, as if an unseen power were at work changing the character of the old-fashioned house. But Quentin was in no mood to pause for the appreciation of artistic effects; he was out on sentry duty to discover who was the midnight marauder disturbing honest people from their slumbers. Opposite the library door he paused a moment, his heart beating a little faster with the excitement of the adventure. From within came a faint rustle of paper, then the sound of a footstep.

Gripping the stick firmer in his hand, Lee pushed open the door, confronting, not as he expected, some midnight housebreaker, but Connisterre himself—Connisterre fully dressed, and with a roll of papers in his hand. The hasty expression on Quentin's lips died away, for something in the blank, unseeing look in Geoffrey's eyes sent a disagreeable thrill down the young man's spine. He experienced an uncanny sensation, as if face to face with some mystery he could not fathom; but the next moment he recovered himself. This was a case of somnambulism, but he had never known Connisterre was a victim to it. What had he better do? He put down his candle and stood waiting. The artist was standing by a recess in the wall, the existence of which had hitherto been a secret to Quentin. Now a panel pushed back in the wainscotting revealed the little cupboard behind. Geoffrey came on a step or two, paused by the *escritoire*, and pulled open one of its drawers. Then he

hesitated again, looking at the papers in his hand, which Quentin saw were bank notes.

‘I must hide them somewhere,’ he began, in a slow, deliberate voice, making a long pause between the sentences. ‘This is hardly safe—I ought not to put temptation in any one’s way. Timmins knows of it—but he is honest, I think.’ A pause. ‘Léonie said—I must lock it up—but where?’ He paused again, staring now straight at Quentin Lee, who found the position intolerable.

‘It’s all right, old man,’ he said gently, ‘I will put them away for you. Come, give them to me and go back to bed.’

The carefully modulated tones of Lee’s voice would not of themselves have been enough to arouse Connisterre, but as he made a step forward the heavy stick, which he had balanced against the table, fell to the ground with a crash loud enough to awake the seven sleepers.

‘You stupid idiot,’ muttered Quentin, apostrophising both himself and the stick.

Thus rudely aroused from his sleep, Connisterre started and uttered a little exclamation.

‘I—why, what is it—where am I?’ he said vaguely, looking first round the room and then at the notes in his hand.

‘It’s a mere trifle, old man,’ said Quentin, pushing him into a chair. ‘You would have known nothing about it but for my clumsy foolery. I heard a noise, came down to see what it was, and found you roaming about in your sleep, that is all. Look here—I say, haven’t you been undressed? Why, it is nearly two o’clock.’

‘I must have fallen asleep in the chair. I don’t remember anything from then until now,’ said Connisterre, still staring stupidly at the notes. ‘Where have these come from?’

‘From over there probably,’ returned Quentin, nodding towards the secret cupboard in the wall. ‘When I came in you

were standing by it, and jabbering nonsense about finding a safe place for some money.'

Into Geoffrey's face rushed a sudden glow of colour. Clear! everything was clear as daylight now. The miscreant who had purloined the notes was himself, and but for the terrible consequences he could have laughed aloud at the irony of the situation. His mind, preternaturally acute now, had found the solution. He remembered his anxiety respecting these notes the preceding night, remembered how he had half determined to dress himself and go down to the library for them. The impression on his mind had been so great that he must have yielded to an attack of somnambulism, a malady to which in boyish days he had been a victim, and hidden the notes away in a secret cupboard, of which only he and Blair knew the existence. Connisterre cursed himself for his stupidity. What reparation could he make to the woman whom he had so foully wronged?

‘Have you done this sort of thing before?’ asked Lee, coming back to the table from an inquisitive examination of the sliding panel.

‘Scores of times when I was a boy; but I fancied I had outgrown it.’

‘How awkward! There is no limit to the complications it might cause. If I were you, I would be locked in my room at night.’

‘That would be a safer plan than roaming the house,’ agreed Geoffrey; then he looked up at the lad, and spoke unsteadily. ‘I am very grateful to you for this night’s work. The loss of the notes has given Léonie and myself some uneasiness. I was so certain of the servants’ honesty that I hated to suspect them.’

‘Especially when you were the thief all the time,’ laughed Quentin. He pulled himself up off the table and hesitated.

‘Look here, old fellow,’ he said, with boyish directness, ‘don’t be offended, but is

there something wrong? You look most awfully down in the mouth. Can I help you? If so, I'll do it like a shot.'

'I know you would. Don't think I undervalue your friendship; only—at present I cannot tell you any more. Things have got out of gear somehow. I must try to get them in again by myself.' Connisterre thrust the notes into a drawer and locked them up. 'I suppose we may as well go to bed,' he said, turning out the light.

Quentin went off, feeling very much puzzled, and stood for some minutes staring out of his open bedroom window into the moonlit street. Things undoubtedly *were* very much out of gear.

'Poor old man,' he said at last, commiseratingly, *à propos* of Connisterre, who had left him at the bedroom door with a brief, almost curt, good-night. 'There is something wrong. I wonder——' A pause, then—

'*Cherchez la femme!*' he burst out again savagely. 'Confound her.'

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And a hundred miles away Léonie Con-  
nisterre, sitting in her big lonely bedroom  
in the manor-house at Forest Deane, was  
keeping vigil also. She had cut herself off  
from Geoffrey, but the act had wounded her  
as deeply as it had wounded him. Some-  
times pride is stronger than love. It was so  
now. There was no need for Quentin Lee's  
bitter condemnation, but rather for pity and  
compassion.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### OUTSIDE THE PALE

*Prince Henry.* Gone ! and the light of all my life gone with her.  
A sudden darkness falls upon the world !

*The Golden Legend.*

WHEN Léonie left home, and went away with a set determination to leave her husband for ever, she took the step in no impulse of unreasoning passion. The shock of Geoffrey's shameful accusation, the knowledge that he could believe it possible for her to sink to the level of a thief, transformed her in one moment from a heedless girl to a suffering, deeply injured woman. Léonie was no longer a child, to be won over by specious flattery or a tender plea for forgiveness. She realised not only the cruelty of the insult, but also the indifference with which her husband had

met her passionate avowal of love. He had fancied that she could be content with so little, fancied that simply to become his wife and have the shelter of his name would be happiness enough for her, while all the time her heart was hungering for a word of love, a tender thought. Ah well, he should learn his mistake now. She could live her life without him. The world was wide enough for them to choose separate paths, and she had no fear he would wish her to walk in his. After leaving Connisterre in the library, Léonie wasted no time in doubts and hesitations as to the course she would pursue, but went straight to her own room, and issued brief instructions to Adèle to pack a port-manteau with the clothes she would require for a few days' stay ; and then, while the girl was going about the task with her customary quickness, she had sat down and written the farewell letter to her husband. It did not take long ; such letters seldom do. They are dashed off at a speed in proportion to the

agony of the writer, but if Connisterre had followed his wife to her room it would have made no difference in her decision. Commands, entreaties, sarcasm, prayers alike would have been unavailing. Nothing short of physical force could have kept Léonie in that house after such a scene. If her going away meant a scandal, well, let there be a scandal; she did not care. Lady Paget's surprise, despair, and bewilderment when the girl put in an appearance at the Manor House later on that same day, and coolly stated her intention to remain if it were agreeable to her friend, was almost ludicrous. Léonie was very candid. She gave a frank, almost reckless confession of what had taken place, avowed her determination to make this rupture between herself and her husband a final one, and begged for a shelter until she could decide what to do. Lady Paget listened with growing anxiety, and a keen sense of anger against Connisterre. His conduct was unwarrantable, but being at

heart a meek and very gentle woman, she counselled Léonie strongly to return to her husband and let the affair blow over.

‘Of course, dear, I am very glad to have you here,’ she said lovingly, patting the girl’s soft little hand as Léonie knelt beside the chair, choking back the angry tears which would force themselves down her cheek during the recital of her wrongs. ‘Monica is away, and you would be company for me, but it is not your proper place. Let me write to your husband, love. You admit he had some cause to be incensed with you, and surely that is a mitigation of his offence?’

‘It is *not*,’ exclaimed Léonie, an angry spot of colour in her cheeks. ‘How dared he think I could stoop so low. Besides, he does not want me. I am only a burden, a hindrance to him. If I were dead he would marry Claudia. No, Lady Paget, I will not live with him again!’

‘But, Léonie, you must pay some respect to the world’s opinion, for, justly or unjustly,

it is very hard upon women who leave their husbands. Do not have to learn this to your cost. I quite admit that he has injured you, I admit you have every reason to resent it, but do not forget that the fact of your having secret relations with a man, such as this Mr. Latouche, must have incensed any husband. You were carrying on an acquaintance with him in direct opposition to Mr. Connisterre's wishes. There is a great deal of excuse for him, and remember, love, it is the part of every true wife to forget and forgive.'

'That is quite an exploded idea,' said Léonie rather scornfully, and she got up off the floor, standing flushed and indignant before Lady Paget. 'We have been the targets for men's moods and ill-temper too long, but it cannot go on for ever. Are we less human, less sensitive, less proud than they? No. And yet we are expected to endure any injustice at their hands, to sit calmly down in spiritless subjection. How dared Geoffrey insult me with such an accusation,

an accusation which he would have hesitated to cast at his butler. I don't attempt to excuse my father; I know that innocently I did Geoffrey a great wrong when I married him; but—— Now, Lady Paget, if you will not let me stay here, I can go away and live somewhere else very quietly on the little income I have. You have only to say one word.'

'My dear, you are welcome to stay as long as you like,' interrupted Lady Paget, who did not in this instance expect any opposition on Sir John's part. He had always been partial to Léonie, even if he did bully her in turn with the others; had preferred her companionship to Monica's, had made use of her in fifty different ways. Doubtless the baronet would not be averse to giving Léonie a home for some little time, providing she were to make herself useful and be willing to minister to his wants.

'If matters can be agreeably arranged with your husband, you shall stay with me

until things look brighter. Gossip will not be so rife if you are here with one of Mr. Connisterre's oldest friends. As for a separate establishment as you suggest, that is quite out of the question, and personally I do not believe you will persist in this separation. When natural resentment has had time to cool you will see things differently.'

But Léonie shook her head. She had made her decision, and meant to abide by it.

If Connisterre had built any hopes upon the effect of a personal interview, they were doomed to disappointment. He wrote to Léonie the day after her departure and the discovery of the missing notes, a brief letter containing no word of rebuke or appeal, only beseeching her to consent to a private interview, where they could discuss this intolerable position of affairs more satisfactorily than by letter. He was glad, he said, that she had gone to Lady Paget. For the present this estrangement—which for both their sakes he trusted was only

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a temporary one—was known to nobody but themselves. It was not a diplomatic letter, it was not a letter calculated to win a woman back to the man she had left under such painful circumstances, but Connisterre had hardly known how to write. He meant to say so much, he ended by saying too little. Englishmen, as a rule, have not a happy or graceful mode of expressing their sentiments on paper. Warm-hearted, sincere, straightforward though they may be, the letter of apology or forgiveness is too often so blunt and brusque that it defeats its own ends from first to last. Connisterre's was no exception. Léonie tore this into shreds, and sent him a curt permission to come. She had no fear of yielding now. And so he obeyed, travelling down as swiftly as steam could bring him through the beautiful English country, which had put on all her summer clothing. But Geoffrey had no eyes for the varied tints of the foliage as he was whirled on past orchards where luscious fruit was ripening in

the sunshine, no eyes for dusky copse or brawling stream, nor the cattle standing knee-deep in its pellucid waters, no interest in all the loveliness of the panorama around him, although at another time he would have drunk it in with a sense of keen enjoyment, delighting in nature with all an artist's vivid appreciation of her charms. He was thankful when his journey was at an end, thankful when the local train from Derby had put him down in sleepy little Forest Deane, and he was free to try and make his peace, to bring back the sunshine to his life. Out in the quaint old garden of the Manor House roses were filling the air with a fragrant perfume, climbing the time-stained walls, peeping audaciously through the open windows. The birds were carolling overhead amongst the swaying branches; it seemed as if the air were filled with song. It was a day in which Dame Nature calls out to men to follow her example and be happy, not a day on which to drag out a quarrel to the bitter end, with

pride on the one hand and impatience on the other.

‘I am afraid you will find Léonie very obdurate,’ said Lady Paget, who came to Connisterre first, and looked with some anxiety into his handsome, impassive face. ‘You must not blame me for seeming to take her part. I have talked very seriously, believe me, but she is as fierce in her resentment as in her love, poor child.’

‘I am sure you have been everything that is kind and judicious,’ said Geoffrey, his colour deepening a little. He was a proud man, and the position embarrassed him.

‘You must be prepared to—— I mean she has taken this very much to heart.’

‘She had a right. It has been a most unfortunate affair from beginning to end. You will allow me to thank you, Lady Paget, for so generously giving her your protection. It was a great relief to me when I knew Léonie was here.’

‘She is very welcome. You—you will

not be hard with her, Mr. Connisterre. It will do no good. Allow her to remain with me for a little time, until the first heat of it has passed over. It is easy for you to explain that she is paying me a long visit, should people seem curious as to why she does not accompany you to Scotland.'

'You do not think I am likely to persuade her to return,' said Geoffrey, with a keen glance into the gentle old face opposite to him.

Lady Paget shook her head.

'No,' she said rather sadly. 'At all events, not unless you can use stronger arguments than I have been able to. But I am keeping you in suspense; I will send her to you,' and then Lady Paget went away, leaving Connisterre staring gloomily into the sunlit garden, where the flowers seemed to mock him in their brightness, and nature was in her merriest mood. A summer haze overhung the distant hills, blotting out their giant bulk, and lay like a curtain over the verdant

land. He could just see the river winding, a silver thread through the meadow beyond, until it lost itself in the wood where he and Léonie had so often wandered together a few short months before. When his wife at last came to him he started a little, so deep and painful had been his reverie, and although she had been the subject of it, her actual presence was a shock. She stood by the table waiting for him to speak, her eyes dark, brilliant, staring at him, half nervous, half defiant. She was very pale, but there was no faltering in that close-set little mouth, no varying colour to testify whether his coming had affected her or not.

‘Won’t you sit down, Léonie?’ asked Connisterre, trying to speak naturally. ‘I have a great deal to say to you, something also to ask, and I want you to give me a patient hearing.’

She sat down then in a big chair close beside the table, leaning her head upon her hand, and staring persistently at the floor.

Connisterre came a little nearer to her. He had in his hand the letter of farewell which she had written to him.

‘I want to ask first if you mean all this. I know at the time you did, but now?’ A little wave of colour crept into the girl’s cheeks.

‘Yes,’ she said defiantly. ‘Every word.’

‘And you do so still even when I come to ask your forgiveness? I must have been mad—I *was* mad for the time, but consider whether the finding of your letter to Latouche was not some excuse for me. Léonie, don’t be too hard. Can you not let bygones be bygones, and we will begin a fresh start together? I have behaved like a brute to you, but dear, it is not yet too late for us to be happy. Don’t wreck both your future and mine by this persistent separation. We took one another for better or worse; I by my folly have made it the latter for you; but I will remedy that. Try to forgive me.’ She was silent, but Connisterre

could see that his pleading had not moved her.

‘What else can I say,’ he went on, laying his hand over hers, but she withdrew it hastily. ‘I cannot compel you to live with me, nor would I if I could. You are perfectly free, but don’t set too light an estimate on the consequences of your decision now. We are both young; we have practically still all our lives to live, and as the law can give you no real release from me, our separation is a mere matter of words. Surely it is better to spend the rest of our lives together than raise a scandal by taking different ways. Think it well over, Léonie. It is impossible for me to give you your freedom. Is it well to take an apology for one and send me adrift?’

Léonie left her chair and went across to the window, looking back at her husband with a sort of dreary scorn in her eyes.

‘Do you know what you are asking me to do,’ she said. ‘You are asking me to go back to a man who has only the dead letter

of a love to offer me. It is quite true—no, hear me out, as Connisterre came towards her with a hasty exclamation on his lips. ‘I loved you once, oh God! *how* I loved you. I asked for bread and you gave me a stone. It did not take me many weeks to learn that your professed affection had no solid ground, that your pictures were more to you than your wife, and that Claudia Desborough was more to you than either. I endured it all. I loved you and I suffered. It was my fault that you had not married her, and I cannot tell you the shame that knowledge was to me. I had lost my happiness—lost everything. My parentage was a disgrace, my presence was a burden. No, I don’t blame you for loving her—she is very beautiful, you could not help it; but—why did you marry me? Did you think I was such a poor thing that I could not be trusted to stand alone?’

‘Léonie, don’t,’ pleaded Connisterre inexpressibly touched by the girl’s pathos. ‘Why do you say that I do not love you?’

Only come back to me, dear, and let me teach you how very wrongly you have judged me.'

'No, let me speak,' she went on, playing nervously with a sprig of sweetbriar in her hands. Oh, in the years to come, how Léonie hated the scent of this simple plant. 'I have not much more to say. You are quite justified in regretting your marriage now that I have told you the truth about my father. I think Gerard must have known it, and if he, a much less honourable man than you, could not endure the connection, why should you? If I were able to—But there is another thing also. How dare you expect me to return to a man who can believe his wife capable of—of what you accused me the other day? It has degraded me even in my own eyes——' She broke off, burying her face in her hands.

'I can't forget it, and I can't forgive you,' she wailed. 'You have killed my love or deadened it; I don't know which. Let us

say good-bye, for there is no happiness for me with you now. If there were nothing else there is another woman between us, and the memory of what might have been. It is too hard—I will not come back to you.'

'You are altogether wrong,' said Connisterre passionately, his newly awakened love for her cut to the quick. 'Put Claudia Desborough out of the question; believe it or not as you like, she is nothing to me. Were I free to marry again, I would not ask her to be my wife. Put it, I say, on one side. If there were no such woman in existence; if there were nothing between us but the memory of my outrageous conduct the other day, would you overlook it and come back to me?'

'No,' she said, lifting her eyes to his. 'I could not—yet. There may come a time, but I do not know. The sight of you is painful. It is connected with shame and humiliation. All I ask is that I may be allowed to go my own way—alone.'

‘Then there is nothing more to be said.’ Connisterre was silent for a moment. He was beaten at every point. He had not anticipated this strenuous resistance, and Léonie, in her pride and independence, seemed a thousand times more precious to him than before.

‘Since you are resolved to break with me I must submit,’ he said slowly. ‘I am not going to ask you to reconsider your decision, only will you promise, for a time at least, to make your home here? It will leave a way open for us to resume our former relations—if you choose. I will, of course, settle an allowance upon you.’

‘No,’ exclaimed Léonie, ‘I shall not take a penny from you. Don’t imagine for one instant that I hold myself blameless. I deceived you about my previous acquaintance with Raoul Latouche. I disobeyed you when I renewed it—but you know why that was—and then I told you—a lie about that money. I gave you every cause for suspicion, but there

is something on your side too. Although it is no palliation of my own fault, you also have wronged me. Let it end here. Don't ask me to take money from you. I will stay on as Lady Paget's companion, and my income, even if it is small, is sufficient for my wants. I promise to make no change without first telling you about it; but I must be free—I will be free. I think'—with emphasis—'I think I do not ever want to see you again.'

Connisterre winced. It is doubtful if Léonie indeed meant all she said—at the time probably yes—but her state of agitation, the unnerving influence of two almost sleepless nights, the exaggerated light in which she viewed the whole affair, were to blame for the bitterness of her speech, and a time might come when she would regret it. Such a love as Léonie's for Geoffrey Connisterre may be temporarily deadened by some severe shock, but it is rarely or ever killed outright.

'I wonder if you realise how cruel you

are to me,' he said. But perhaps I deserve it. I can only repeat what from my soul I honestly believe, that even now I could make you happy if you would let me. You are sending me away. I shall not come back unless you ask me; only remember this, that in any sorrow or perplexity you need only send me one line and I will return.' Connisterre went close up to his wife, looking at her face as if he would imprint her lineaments on his memory. Was there in his mind some prevision of evil, a presentiment that this was the last time he would see them, which brought that look of wistful regret to his own. He clasped her suddenly in his arms, pressed his lips to hers in a mute farewell. Another moment and they had parted.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### DARK DAYS

Into each life some rain must fall,  
Some days be dark and dreary.

LONGFELLOW.

SUMMER had faded into autumn, autumn into the early days of winter, and already the keen December winds, with their accompaniment of sleet and snow, were scouring the streets with a bitter breath and opening the gate of death to the old and feeble. Some Londoners who dreaded the winter fogs and cold had taken wing to Brighton. Others, who could wander still further afield, were revelling in the sunshine of the Riviera and the gay wickedness of the Monte Carlo gaming *salons*. Some, however, stood their ground, and took a certain pleasure in the

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keenness of the wind as it tore through Kensington Gardens and surged about the leafless trees, standing in melancholy dignity, cold and brown. The skies had a lowering look, with a threatening of snow, but now and then there came a gleam of light across the gray expanse. Parliament had reassembled, a quiet Parliament so far, wherein was no undignified Rugby scrimmage on the floor of the House, a Parliament where members were polite, even affectionate, to one another, and the Irish party, either diplomatic, despairing, or depressed, sat in gloomy silence, content to let the business of the House proceed free from party strife or rancorous words. What if the Government had refused to take into consideration the burning question of the unemployed or the seditious meetings in Trafalgar Square? Were they not pushing forward the Employers' Liability and the Parish Councils and half a hundred other bills? Could they not console themselves with the Scriptural

text, 'The poor ye have always with ye.' It almost seemed impious to try and alter conditions which had existed for so many generations; and as for the navy, oh the English navy would be found quite strong enough to defend her country when necessity arose, and Russia had bought up every available island in the Mediterranean for coaling stations. It was a policy of *laissez faire*, but after all *laissez faire* is very comfortable so long as nobody tries to interfere with it; and if some honourable members chose to make themselves odious by putting numerical questions as to the relative strength of European naval powers, well then it showed very bad taste on their part, and was tantamount to casting a slur upon the invincibility of England and her chances of victory if attacked. So the session dragged through its tedious days, and famine pale and gaunt stalked through the heart of poverty-stricken London.

Amongst others who drifted back to

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London after the summer holiday came Geoffrey Connisterre, somewhat to the surprise of those who had an inkling of his domestic affairs. Perhaps it was because after a time any other life than London palled upon him—he missed its gaiety, and interest, and amusements—or perhaps it was a mere spirit of bravado, a deliberate facing of the world's opinion, which dragged him back from the heather-clad slopes and gorgeous sunsets of bonnie Scotland. Anyway, whatever the reason, he returned and settled down to steady work in that old house on Campden Hill. With him, too, came Quentin Lee, who had spent part of his holiday in the Highlands with Connisterre, and knew more than any one else of the demon of ceaseless unrest which seemed to possess his friend. Connisterre was not a man to talk much about his private affairs, or wear his heart upon his sleeve for any careless observer to peck at; but his intimacy with Lee had so grown and

strengthened through those days of close companionship, that it seemed to have overleapt the barrier of ordinary reserve and knitted them in a friendship of the closest. More by casual words than any actual statement, Quentin Lee learned that the breach between husband and wife was a well-nigh impassable one; but with a chivalrous nicety of feeling Quentin never attempted to discover the cause. He respected Connisterre's evident shrinking from it, and took the present relations as an everyday matter, with which it was not his province to interfere. Questioned about the estrangement between Mr. and Mrs. Connisterre by outsiders, whose curiosity outrivalled their delicacy, Lee had the same answer for all. A cool stare, which none knew better than he how to assume, a momentary silence chilling enough to damp the ardour of the most inquisitive, and a polite but unmistakable change of conversation. People grew to understand this at last, and contented them-

selves with private speculations as to which was really to blame in the matter. Unquestionably it would have been wiser for Connisterre, had he wished to avoid the flood of gossip, to have remained in Scotland or absented himself abroad, giving a more or less fictitious explanation that his wife had remained in England to avoid the discomforts of foreign travel: but this has been done so often that these so-called amicable arrangements bear at best the impress of suspicion on them. Society is not easily hoodwinked. Besides, as there was very little possibility of this breach between himself and his wife being rapidly healed, Geoffrey thought it better to face the worst at once. He was only one of many others who had found that diverse paths in matrimony were sometimes a necessity. He had hoped against hope that the dull monotony of Forest Deane life would predispose Léonie to take a more lenient view of the position, and find some middle path whereby they might come together

again ; but as the weeks passed on, and autumn merged into winter, still bringing no sign of relenting from his wife, Connister gave up all hope. He had his work to consider ; the old studio life was waiting for him ; there was money to make, fame to achieve. So he came back, and drifted by degrees into the free, unrestrained life which had been his before marriage. Such time as he could spare from work he devoted to his friends and the ordinary run of London amusements. He was present at theatre first nights, at the opera or the popular concerts. His name figured in the lists of guests at artistic receptions, *musicales*, or dances. No festivity seemed complete without him, and he brought to each his customary *bonhomie* and brightness, bearing before the world a face so free from domestic cares and anxieties that many of his acquaintances were forced to conclude that after all things could not have gone so badly with him. To every one he gave the same

reply. Mrs. Connisterre was spending the winter in Derbyshire with an old friend, as London did not agree with her. The state of her health demanded a warmer climate; and his explanation was received with polite credulity. Matrimony in the present day runs on such very different lines to what it did twenty years ago. Individual tastes, interests, and ambitions have greater scope. It is no longer considered necessary that a wife should be merely the shadow of her husband or a meek repetition of his opinions. Society permits her to select her own path, and so long as she is not guilty of the bad taste of choosing some male companion other than her husband to tread it with her, the voice of scandal is not raised in open rebuke. But if Connisterre carried a brave front to the world, Quentin Lee was not deceived. Seeing beneath the surface of his friend's private life, he could guess at the wakeful, restless nights which sent Connisterre down to breakfast with pallid face and dreamy

eyes. He knew of the long moody fits of abstraction in which sometimes the artist would indulge, lounging before the library fire, giving back a curt response, or perhaps no response at all, to remarks addressed to him, but Quentin looked on and made no sign, only his heart was hot with secret resentment against Léonie.

The weeks drifted slowly by, and December came in, bringing as usual its complement of storm and wind and shipwrecks all along the coast. It was bitterly cold, so cold that even those who had every luxury which money could buy shivered and anathematised the weather in accents of disgust.

‘It is, I suppose, to equalise the abnormal amount of sunshine we have had this summer that we have a corresponding degree of cold to endure now. There may be a fitness in the arrangement, but it is highly objectionable,’ some one said to Connisterre one afternoon *à propos* of the weather, and he laughingly

agreed. The scene was a wedding reception at the house of one of his old friends. He had been constrained to put in an appearance for the sake of auld lang syne, but had come somewhat against his inclination, and was wishing it well over. The afternoon was intensely cold, with a lowering sky and an occasional snow-storm, but within the house all was gaiety and brightness. Connisterre, looking rather pale, had done his duty manfully, had congratulated the happy pair, whose radiant faces were rippling over with smiles, had glanced at the exquisite presents displayed in the room, listened to the society platitudes and hum of conversation, and was now seeking for a way of escape from the throng.

‘I suppose we have no need to grumble,’ he said in reply to his companion, a bright, pretty brunette, at whose side he had been for the last ten minutes. ‘Even if it blows and rains and snows all winter, there is an ideal summer upon which to look back.’

‘You are a philosopher, Mr. Connisterre.’

‘I? oh no. I am too quick at resenting even small discomforts to ever become one. Most of us pretend to philosophise, but it is pretence, you know. When the annoyance comes we are all of us ready to cry out that Diogenes was a fool, and philosophy impossible.’

‘I don’t know much about Diogenes,’ returned his companion, whose drawling accents testified to her American parentage, even if her picturesque face and slender hands and feet had not already done so. ‘Wasn’t he rather a stupid sort of old Johnnie who rolled about the world in a tub, and made rude remarks which he considered witty, when people were civil to him anyhow?’

‘That depends upon what you consider rude,’ said Connisterre with a laugh. ‘I daresay he had an unvarnished mode of answering remarks which did not commend

itself to the wit and beauty of those days. The polite nothings of society were wasted upon him.'

'I don't like people who pride themselves upon their candour,' said Miss Cathcart, moving a little aside to allow a huge dowager, clad in brocade and priceless lace, to pass them. Isn't that dress just sweet now! but in New York we would have to pay a fortune for it. My! what feet! No, I don't like candid people, Mr. Connisterre. It is only a legalised way of being rude. Any one can say sharp things and manufacture caps to fit other people——' She broke off and looked across the room, a swift smile dawning in her eyes.

'There is Mrs. Hanbury. Do say what she calls that style of dress. It makes one wonder how she puts her clothes on.'

'It looks rather like regimental colours which have seen active service,' returned Connisterre irreverently. 'There is an

elaboration of detail, shall we say—and very little fact.'

'I guess she must have commenced to build the costume without any clear notion how to do it, and the rest came like a succession of after thoughts, first a ribbon, then a flower, and then a feather. She looks like a badly made shower bouquet.'

'Or a bouquet in a shower,' he rejoined quickly.

'I have heard Mr. Connisterre is a severe critic of ladies' dress. I can believe it now,' said Miss Cathcart with an upward glance and one roguish dimple coming into play. What a pity her companion was married, she thought, and married unfortunately, too, so gossip said. It seemed a waste of a really nice man, such a dog in the manger principle. There were a dozen girls in that room who would doubtless have made Mr. Connisterre excellent wives.

'I should think it is impossible to keep pace with the changes of fashion,' went on

Geoffrey after a pause. 'What an eternal time you ladies must waste considering the endless *minutiæ* of a costume.'

'No more than you gentlemen,' retorted the little American. 'What with yacht-ing-suits, and smoking-suits, and the latest things in ties, and gloves, and collars, your minds run as much upon dress as ours. Men love shopping. Ten years ago they scorned it. Look at the big London shops; any day you may see crowds of men dancing attendance on their female friends. It isn't out of pure courtesy, it is simply because they feel quite in their element amongst silks, and velvets, and ribbons, and millinery, and they are not a bit ashamed of it. Half the men you meet can tell you what a girl has on, from the tip of her bonnet to the gold clocks in her stockings. You ain't shocked?' this with a giggle.

'Not at all,' laughed Connisterre. 'Stockings are a very important item, for they often make or mar a costume.'

'I went to the House last night,' rattled on

Miss Cathcart, changing the subject. ‘My, what a funny place it is! Why do you keep your ladies behind a cage like an eastern seraglio? It’s awful unchivalrous. They couldn’t do any harm if the gallery were open—now could they?’

‘Oh yes, incalculable harm,’ said Connister jestingly. ‘In a momentous question, for instance, such as the ceding of Gibraltar to Spain in exchange for a coaling station somewhere else, one of the ladies in the front row might distract the attention of some promising but youthful legislator to such an extent that in the division he would record his vote with the “ayes” instead of the “noes” and *vice versa*. A man, especially a young man, is only human. You cannot expect him to concentrate his mind on the machinations of Russia, or the dull boredom of the Parish Councils Bill, when some fair damsel with whom he is in love is trying to catch his eye from the ladies’ gallery and telegraph an urgent request for tea. Better

the Russian fleet should become supreme in the Mediterranean than his *inamorata* die of thirst. I am fully convinced that the abolition of the grille heralds the decline of our great country.'

'You are a traitor, Mr. Connisterre. I thought you were willing to allow women equal advantages?'

'So far as is consistent with the safety of the Empire, yes. But I am an Englishman first and a gallant after.'

'What nonsense!' retorted the American. 'Miss Desborough,' addressing herself to Claudia, who, standing near to them, had overheard part of their conversation; 'do you hear Mr. Connisterre's heretical sentiments? I guess we wouldn't let our New York boys talk like this.'

'Englishmen have so many national prejudices to shake off,' said Claudia carelessly.

She was looking wonderfully well, dressed as usual with perfect taste. The costume of myrtle green, with its gold embroidered

waistcoat and trimmings of sable fur, appealed to Connisterre's fastidious taste, but he had long ago ceased to regard the wearer with any particular interest. Of late they had not come much in contact with one another.

'Then why don't they make an effort? Your parliamentary cage is a disgrace to civilisation,' rattled on Miss Cathcart. 'You can't see the leading members come in, you can only count all the bald heads below, and indulge in phrenological speculations.'

'I don't take very much interest in it,' said Claudia, re-clasping a bangle on her wrist. 'I have been to the House sometimes, but there seems in debate to be no medium between active rudeness and passive boredom. They will never take away the grille through any agitation I shall raise.'

'I remember your cousin, Mr. Latouche, said to me once that he wondered any woman would countenance such a humiliation to her sex by entering the cage,' laughed the American. 'I guess he wasn't far wrong

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either. Where is he now? Not in London?’

‘No, he has gone to the Cape with a friend.’

‘Now, that is sweet! I wish I could go. Did you know Mr. Latouche,’ she added, turning to Connisterre. ‘He is a most delightful man, but such a cynic, a real good cynic.’

Connisterre thought of Latouche as he had last seen him, crouching like a beaten hound on the floor, and smiled satirically.

‘I had that pleasure—once,’ he said with an odd smile, and then a few minutes later he took leave of his hostess and went away.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### INTO OUTER DARKNESS

A cry that shiver'd to the tingling stars,  
And, as it were one voice, an agony  
Of lamentation, like a wind that shrieks  
All night in a waste land, where no one comes.

TENNYSON.

CONNISTERRE'S picture for the forthcoming Academy — 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept' — was rapidly growing to perfection under the clever hands of its creator. The artist realised that it was by far the best work he had ever done. He had put his very self into it, his heart and soul, grudging neither time, labour, nor painstaking study on every detail. He rejoiced in it day by day as a mother rejoices in the growing beauty of some loved child. It was a picture calculated to bring well-merited fame to its creator, and

he would have been less than human to not feel both self-satisfaction and pride. There was in it a grace and purity and freshness of colouring, for which Connisterre had to thank his Eastern travels two years ago—a beauty in the figures and wonderful pathos in the features. His models, taken all from the Jewish community, were young and for the most part beautiful; it had been a positive pleasure for him to portray them on canvas, and he longed for yet dreaded the moment when his picture would be finished; almost, it seemed, as if a part of his life would be taken away.

The central figure, a slim, graceful Jewish maiden holding a harp in one hand, while with the other she clasped loosely the branch of a willow tree, was as yet unfinished. He had not for some time been able to find a model whose features and expression should convey the pathos of the situation, but fortune at last favoured him. He had amongst his roamings in Petticoat Lane discovered what

he sought, a little, sad-faced Jewish girl of about fourteen, whose life of repression and constant ill-usage had combined to produce a misery in the childish features almost too literal. There were still several weeks of constant labour to be expended before the painting would reach completion.

‘I shall never do anything better than this,’ said Connisterre thoughtfully, as he stood before his easel one afternoon staring at the canvas. He had not come into the studio to work, but was roaming about it in a desultory manner, waiting for the time to pass before he went out to keep an appointment.

‘It should bring me success if the gods are propitious.’ He leaned forward, touching with a brush, almost lovingly, the drapery of one of the maidens.

‘Art is a very exacting mistress, so they say, but, at least, she repays one. Poor little Léonie. It seems to me that I must have neglected her very often for this studio of

mine. I never meant it, God knows, I never did; but I think now it was a partial cause of the estrangement between us. It kept her from confiding in me, and then came the tempter's chance. What fools we are, what blind fools! My little girl, will you ever come back to me, I wonder?'

Connisterre left the canvas and sat down, shading his eyes with one hand. They had been painful of late, as if incessant work had overstrained them, so painful in fact that, acting under a sudden impulse of apprehension, he had written to an oculist in Harley Street, and made an appointment for that afternoon. Very probably the affection would prove to be a trifling one—Connisterre was not given to worrying unduly over his health, but it might be better to seek advice before the discomfort interfered with his work.

'I cannot afford to knock up just now,' he ruminated, pushing his hair back rather wearily. 'So much depends upon it; but next year, perhaps, I'll take a thorough rest,

and go East again for a little time. I must make enough money to leave Léonie well provided for, poor child, in the event of anything happening to me, although she would not be so badly off if I died to-morrow. There is this house, and my private income; but as we spent a considerable amount one way and another last year, perhaps it would be better to retrench.'

He looked at his watch, yawned once or twice, then got up. He had just comfortable time in which to keep his appointment. Adam came out into the hall as Connisterre went downstairs. The faithful old man had been uneasy of late respecting his master's unsatisfactory health, and now he looked up at him anxiously, uttering a fervent wish that the oculist would be able to afford him some relief. It was in a measure owing to Blair's entreaties that Connisterre had consented to seek advice.

'Ten to one he will laugh at me for old womanish fears about nothing,' said Geoffrey,

struggling into his overcoat. 'Most people's eyes give them trouble at one time or other. I have only been over-doing it a little.'

'Never you mind that, sir. Better laugh nor cry, and it won't hurt you to ask a question or two. Mr. Geoffrey,' with a note of pleading in his rough voice; 'you'll tell me faithful now every word he says. You were always careless about your health.'

'Tell you, oh dear, yes,' laughed Connister, as he went outside and whistled for a hansom. 'If I don't tell my best friend, Adam, who must I tell?'

'You'll never ha' one to think more of you nor I do,' said Adam gravely, and his honest eyes were full of affection. 'Sometimes it seems as if I were no count at all, nor much manner o' use when the world goes the right way with you; then I thinks, maybe he'll want me very bad some day, so I'll hang on like an old coat. I don't take up

much room, but he'll find me there when I'm wanted.'

'No doubt of that,' returned Connisterre cheerily. 'You and I have been through so much together, we are not likely to fail one another at the pull. Tell Mr. Lee I shall be home to dinner. By Jove! what a cold wind.'

Geoffrey turned his coat collar up as he went down the steps, looking back at Blair with a friendly smile. It was many a long day before the old man saw his master smile again. In spite of its sharpness there was an exhilarating feeling in the breeze which sent the blood coursing more rapidly through Connisterre's veins, and brought a healthy glow to his cheeks as he drove away to Harley Street. The wintry sun hung like a scarlet ball pendant from the heavens, with a gray mist before its face, which hid some of the dazzling glory. The streets were crowded with people, for it was nearing Christmas, and there was a sense of festive

holiday-making in the air, which half decided the artist to steal a few days' leisure from his work. He felt in need of change and diversion, even if it were a limited one.

'A short rest will make another man of me,' he said to himself as he got out of the hansom. 'I have been doing too much lately.'

He had some minutes to wait before he could see the oculist, and the suspense made him nervous. He was unused to illness in any shape or form. When he went into the consulting-room, Dr. Leresche came forward to meet him. He was a tall, thin, spare man, with a clever face, clean shaven, and resolute.

'I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Connisterre, but sorry to do so under professional circumstances,' he said affably. 'I have been familiar with your name for some time, and in common with many others am a great admirer of your works.'

'Thank you,' said Geoffrey with a pleasant smile. 'You are not so familiar perhaps with

my name as suffering London is with yours, Mr. Leresche.'

They exchanged a few social amenities, and then there came a pause. Leresche looked rather inquiringly at the artist.

'I should like to consult you about my eyes,' said Geoffrey, plunging hastily into the object of his visit. 'They are not satisfactory.'

'I am sorry to hear that. You have overstrained them, perhaps? Report credits you with being a very hard worker.'

'I don't think it is serious,' returned Geoffrey. Then he entered into a brief explanation of the nature of his complaint, neither making light of nor exaggerating the symptoms. At its close he was put through a searching interrogation. From the expression of the oculist's face, Geoffrey could not gather whether he thought lightly or seriously of him.

'Will you come over here and let me examine your eyes,' he said at last, speaking

very gently. 'I wish you had consulted me earlier.'

Geoffrey obeyed. He had begun to feel apprehensive. For a few minutes neither spoke again.

'Your age, I think you said, is—what?' asked Leresche, after he had examined his patient.

'Thirty-three.'

'Ah.'

'Connisterre covered his eyes with one hand. They were smarting horribly. Leresche said nothing. He was tapping his eye-glasses on the back of a book as if in some perplexity.

'I suppose you would recommend entire rest,' said Connisterre, looking up at last. Something in the steady gaze of the other half alarmed him. 'If it is absolutely necessary of course I will do so, but I must ask you not to urge it unless there is no other cure. Every day is of importance to me at present. What is wrong with my eyes?'

‘An affection known as acute *Glaucoma*.’

Connisterre shook his head and laughed. ‘I am no wiser,’ he said. ‘Diagnosis of disease is not taught in the Art School.’ Then, as if some awful apprehension of the truth had entered his mind, he got up suddenly, resting one hand upon the table.

‘You don’t mean to say there is anything *seriously* wrong with them,’ he demanded with a tremor in his voice.

‘Something very seriously wrong, I fear, Mr. Connisterre,’ said the oculist, coming up to him; ‘something which it will take all your courage to face; there is no cure. Had you come to me earlier, I don’t think we could——’

Connisterre turned deathly white. He was trembling in every limb.

‘You mean—great Heaven can it be possible,’ he gasped; ‘you mean that *I am going blind*.’

The awful agony in the man’s despairing voice thrilled Leresche from head to foot.

He was inured to suffering, distress, and anguish; but familiarity with them had not weakened his sympathies. Young, rich, handsome, gifted above his fellow-men with a genius which had already brought him renown, on the very threshold of success, heart and soul devoted to his profession, the case of Geoffrey Connisterre was tragic in the extreme. No wonder Leresche half turned away that he might not see the frenzied appeal in the poor fellow's eyes. He did not answer, but his silence was conclusive. He would have spoken words of consolation, have urged his patient to meet the blow like a man, would have tendered his sympathy; but how inadequate they all seemed to mitigate one iota of that awful suffering.

'Blind! oh, my God,' murmured Connisterre, with a long, shuddering sigh, and he sank upon his knees by the table. He had realised the truth in all its ghastly horror now, and the shock for a moment rendered him half unconscious. As in a dream he

heard Dr. Leresche's deep voice urging him not to give way, speaking consolingly, doing all he could to help him in this dark hour, but he paid no heed. The iron ploughshare of despair had ground into the very foundations of his being—all else around him was a blank. Leresche took him gently by the shoulder at last.

‘Come, Mr. Connisterre,’ he said. ‘Drink this, and pull yourself together. It is a sharp blow, but it must be faced.’

Geoffrey took the wine mechanically, and drained it off at a gulp. A moment later the colour was beginning to creep back into his face. He was stunned by the news, but fully himself.

‘It is true?’ he said. ‘No operation can save them? If there is the ghost of a chance don’t withhold it from me. I will sacrifice every farthing of my money, if by doing so I can save my sight.’

‘There is absolutely nothing,’ said the oculist. ‘Unhappily there are many such

cases. Sometimes we can operate, but not in this particular instance. I can promise you some alleviation, but a cure—no.'

'How long?' Connisterre forced himself to put the question.

'Impossible to say.'

'Six months?'

'Hardly so much,' was the reluctant response.

'Three?'

'Perhaps; I don't know. These cases vary.'

'Not *more* than three?'

'I am afraid not.'

'And then I shall be blind—totally blind.'

'My poor fellow. Yes.'

A shudder ran through Connisterre's frame. He knew the worst now, and he was conscious of a wild desire to get outside into the fresh air, away from these confining walls; to lose himself in the noise and bustle of the city, to forget in outer distraction the horrible

thing which had happened to him. He felt he should go mad if he stayed longer. Blind. Ah, what did it not mean to him! He stood up, staggering a little. Dr. Leresche put out a hand.

‘I never did a harder day’s work than this, Mr. Connisterre,’ he said, genuine emotion in his voice. ‘God alone knows why such a blow should have fallen upon a man of genius like yourself. I wish I could help you.’

‘Help!’ uttered Connisterre, looking out of the window with dull, unseeing eyes. ‘There is neither help nor hope for me now.’

Five minutes later and he was away from the sickening oppression of the house in Harley Street, which henceforth was to stand out in his memory as the place which had seen the deathblow of all his hopes. There was a momentary sensation of relief, but it faded, swallowed up in the dull mental agony consuming him.

Is it possible to realise the feelings of a

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man, whose life hitherto has been one long communion with nature, who has rejoiced in her beauties, who has revelled in all the artistic triumphs of the world, when the ghastly fiat is uttered to him, that henceforth he must walk in darkness, cut off from all that has made existence a paradise to him? Around him nothing but the awful blackness of night, unable to see the flowers and beauteous verdure of the wood, God's glad sunshine, the carolling birds, the full glory of the summer, the ruddy tints of autumn, the pure white snows of winter,—never to see again the familiar faces of those he loves, and which day by day will fade from his memory despite the agonised efforts at recall, leaving him in the shadow while they are in the light. To know that ambitious dreams, which were once the interest of his life, are dashed away, even as the gift of sight, which perhaps he has unconsciously undervalued. To know that for him freedom is for ever curtailed; that a halting, nervous step must take the

place of that careless swinging gait; that he will be helpless as a child, unable to screen himself from danger, to earn his own bread, to join in any amusements; that, in short, he must become a helpless log drifting through the world, a mere useless atom in the great sea of life? Is it, I say, possible to realise such a disaster in even half its entirety? No—a thousand times no. When Connisterre walked away from Harley Street, and, more by instinct than intent, went on towards Regent Circus, he was like a man struggling to escape from some hideous nightmare, utterly reckless what he did or where he went, if only he could find distraction from that awful fact which had well-nigh destroyed his reason. Twenty times that day he might have come to a sudden death amongst the rolling traffic, for he walked on unconscious of his surroundings, his eyes staring straight ahead—drunk, absolutely drunk with horror and despair. What was it to him that cab-drivers shouted, and coachmen swore at his

stupidity, that he was within an ace of being crushed under plunging hoofs, and only rescued by the strenuous efforts of some vigilant policeman? He did not hear, did not care. One word alone seemed stamping itself into his brain to the exclusion of any other.

*‘Blind! Blind!’*

He could grasp nothing else, dream of nothing else, hear nothing else. The air seemed full of it. It shrieked at him from the omnibuses as they rattled past, from the carts and cabs and heavy vans. He could see it written up on every hoarding, on every face, in every window. It clamoured about him with a thousand voices, roared at him above the din of Cheapside and the turmoil of the Strand. Blind! yes, blind for evermore. Soon all this phantasmagoria around him, these hurrying crowds, this jostling, active, busy life would be to him but a memory. For how long, how long——. He stopped, staring stupidly about him, mad for a brief

second as any poor, insane, distracted soul, beating out its life against the padded walls of a mad-house, but he came back to consciousness with a sudden sickening sense of reality. Before him on the pavement an old, blind man, led by a ragged cur, was feeling his way painfully along, guiding himself by a stick, and stopping now and then to ask for alms. It was to Geoffrey as a hideous vision of the future. What was the difference between them? Age and position? ah, yes, but what else? Nothing! Alike in fate, in loneliness, in despair. He put up his hand, wrenching open his collar. He was stifled. He could not breathe. The driver of a passing hansom, mistaking the movement for a signal, drew up. Connisterre put one foot upon the step mechanically.

‘Where to, sir?’

‘Where to? The devil, if you like!’ he said with a wild laugh; and then help came to him, help which would never fail him now. A friendly hand touched his arm.

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‘Get in, Connisterre,’ said Quentin Lee in a quiet voice. One look at the artist’s face had been enough for him. ‘I am coming with you. Bedford Gardens, Campden Hill,’ he added to the driver.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### DEEPER STILL

Then black despair,  
The shadow of a starless night was thrown  
Over the world in which I moved alone.—SHELLEY.

THE day and night dragged on their weary way hour by hour, but no sleep came to Geoffrey Connisterre, as he tossed, open-eyed, upon his pillows, or paced the room with long, unsteady steps, desolate, alone with himself and his misery. Curtly, almost brutally, he had blurted out the truth to Quentin Lee and Blair, turning aside from their proffered sympathy, refusing to allow them to do anything for him. He would be alone—alone to grapple with this hateful fate; no eyes should look upon him. He locked his door, giving a sullen refusal to

Quentin Lee's pleading for admittance. What good could they do, what words of theirs or well-meant consolations could alleviate one jot of his agony? Life, happiness, enjoyment, worldly pleasures, were for ever beyond his reach. He must dree his weird. There was no escape. Dawn broke, cold, gray, and dreary, as only a December dawn can break, with a powdering of snow upon the roofs and frozen ground, and a shrill wind shaking the casements about and chilling everything with its icy breath. Slowly the faint light brightened in the east, the stars grew paler until they faded into nothingness; the sun sent angry beams across the sky, chasing away night's gloom, and a new day was born, a new day, one of those which, when it closed, would have brought Geoffrey Connister a short space nearer perpetual darkness. He came downstairs listlessly through force of habit. His head ached, his eyes were full of pain, his brain seemed on fire. Eat? He loathed the sight of food, the sense of taste

had left him ; he could do nothing but think, and think of what ! Heedless alike of the inclement weather and old Adam Blair's entreaties, he went out and wandered aimlessly about the streets, but he did not know that all the weary day Quentin Lee dogged his footsteps like a shadow, never losing sight of the man whose excited condition of mind had filled both his friends with gravest apprehension and dread. Not until evening came on, and the intense bitterness of the cold made itself apparent even to Connisterre, did he turn homewards with lagging steps and a face as ghastly as the driving snow. Adam met him at the door, but he went on through the hall—seeming not to hear the old man's distressed entreaties that he would take some food—and upstairs to his studio. It was dark, cold, inexpressibly lonely, for the fire had not been lighted. Walking up to his picture, that picture which was to have been the *chef-d'œuvre* of his life, Connisterre turned it round, and lighted the lamp. It

shed a faint, sickly light over the long room and the artist's pallid face. Adam, his worn features working convulsively, remained by the door. He would not, he dare not leave his master alone. With a look, such as a man may wear when he gazes on the face of his beloved dead whom the yawning grave will soon hide from his sight, Connisterre stood before the canvas, his hungry eyes devouring every line and every delicate colour. He would never finish it now. Three months, nay, less than that, and his brushes must for ever be laid aside, his studio shut up—dismantled. He had seen his last picture upon the walls of the Academy. Life, and all that made it worth the living, was over, and he so young. Oh God, so young! There was Léonie, too. Where were his dreams of ambition, his hope to make wealth for her? He must learn to economise, to live quietly. Well, the blind do not require much; their wants are simple. Something to eat, a fire to warm them, a

book to—ah no, not a book, for they cannot read. Connisterre gripped his hands hard. He must be quiet, he must be reasonable, but what was that awful singing in his ears, that scorching pain in his eyes? Had the end come already? No, he could see still, thank God, he could see still. Perhaps after all he might be able to finish the picture. He picked up his palette, put out some paint, selected a brush. Yes, there was not much light, but he only just wanted to test his power. Then the pain again; that horrid, excruciating pain which yesterday had forced him to desist from work. Palette and brush alike fell from Connisterre's nerveless hands.

‘Good God!’ he shouted, flinging up his arms. ‘If I lose my eyesight, let me lose my senses also.’

He staggered across to the sofa, and fell like a log against it. He had reached the end of his tether.

‘Oh, my master, my dear, young master, don’t ee, don’t ee; oh, don’t take on so,’

sobbed old Blair, crying like a child as he knelt down by Connisterre's side. 'Father in Heaven, don't grant his prayer; save his senses; help him to say "Thy Will be done."' He don't know what he's saying. Forgive him. Oh, Master Geoffrey, think of your mother, think of your wife; you must bear up. There's the little missis, sir.'

Connisterre clutched at him passionately.

'Adam, you'll stick to me when I am blind and helpless,' he gasped, his face distorted with fear and anguish. 'Swear that you'll never leave me.'

'Never, so help me God!' said the old man, putting his hand on Geoffrey's waving hair, gently as a mother might have done. 'I'll stay with you till I die.'

Was it the touch, the simple, honest words, the look on Blair's worn face, which broke down the flood-gates of Connisterre's self-control? He was sobbing now, with his head on the cushions, as only strong men can weep, each tear wrung from him like a drop

of his heart's blood. Blair was alarmed by the violence of his passion ; he could only wring his hands and murmur broken words of pity and compassion.

But that breakdown undoubtedly saved Connisterre's reason. His sobs grew quieter, the gasping, convulsive breath resolved into a long shuddering sigh. By degrees the force of his agony spent itself. Physically and mentally worn out he could endure no more. Religious counsels, well-meant advice, sympathy, rebuke, or encouragement alike would have been unavailing to keep him in this dire need ; but God, wiser than man, sent down the only comfort which the tortured heart could feel. For a time, at least, the waters of Lethe drowned the agony of recollection, and Connisterre slept. It was a slumber as profound as that of a child—a slumber sent as a direct rebuke to that blasphemous prayer so lately uttered. Adam stood watching him in silence, looking wistfully down at the pale, haggard face upon the cushions.

‘Thank Heaven my mistress did not live to see this day,’ he murmured, as he gently covered the sleeping man with a rug. ‘Sometimes I’ve thought as it seemed a bit hard she couldn’t know of his success, and what a fine fellow he’s grown. But we are poor creatures at best, we can’t look ahead and see what’s coming. It’s best she was taken, far best. It saved her heart from breakin’, and I misdoubt whether any mother, howsoever much she’d loved him, could have helped him in this gait. It’s the sort o’ cross he’ll have to wrestle alone with, poor boy, ay, poor boy. God help him. I little thought I’d nursed and tended, and brought him up only to see him fair killed with grief at the end.’

Blair sat down in the chill room, and gave himself up to a lonely vigil. Through the long hours of the night which followed, his dog-like fidelity never wavered; not for worlds would he have risked disturbing that Heaven-sent slumber by any movement of

his. Personal cold and discomfort were as nothing weighed against his young master's wellbeing. No man had ever a truer friend than Geoffrey Connisterre had in Adam Blair. The last drops of the old man's heart blood would have been shed willingly for him ; and as he sat on in the dead silence of the night, there came into Adam's simple mind a way in which perchance he might take upon himself his master's sufferings.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN THIS

A faithful friend is the true image of the Deity.—NAPOLÉON I.

DR. LERESCHE had thrown aside his professional *rôle*, and was lounging as a private man in the cosy sanctity of his smoke-room. He was not a society *habitué*, or what the world would term such. While he worked he worked hard, but his hours of leisure he preferred to spend in quiet retirement, with a light novel and a good cigar, rather than in a round of social obligations and demands. On this particular evening it was with a sigh of positive relief that he drew up a lounge chair before the fire, adjusted his reading lamp, and gave himself up for a thorough-going 'laze,' with all the keen appreciation of a man who has done a hard day's work, and

feels that he has earned his rest. Outside, the rain was beating against the window in a torrent, while the wind seemed to roar a fitting accompaniment, as it increased in violence and rattled the casement about.

‘What a night!’ thought the surgeon, puffing contentedly at a favourite meerschäum; ‘not fit to turn a dog out. There is no chance of Percival coming up as he suggested, unless he cabs it. Oh, rattle away, rattle away,’ apostrophising the stormy elements; ‘I don’t care a hang.’ He stretched out a hand for a book lying on the table near him, then bent forward in a listening attitude as a prolonged rat-tat-tat sounded on the outer door.

‘He has come up after all then. Jackson,’ turning his head as the man-servant came in, ‘show Mr. Percival in here, and bring in a bottle of claret and some soda-water.’

‘It is not Mr. Percival, sir. It is somebody wanting to see you. I told him the

consulting hours, but he pressed to see you now. Says it is urgent.'

'What sort of a person is it?' asked the oculist impatiently. He was annoyed at the interruption.

'He looks like a gentleman's servant, sir ; a decent sort of man ; oldish.'

'Go and ask him if to-morrow won't do, Jackson. I am too tired to see any one to-night.'

The man disappeared, but came back in a few minutes.

'He says his name is Adam Blair, sir, and he is servant to Mr. Geoffrey Connisterre. He would take it as a favour if you would see him now for a few minutes.'

'Show him in at once.'

Dr Leresche put down his book, walked across to the table, and turned up another lamp. Connisterre's case had made a deep impression upon him, and he was full of compassion for the unfortunate man. Blair

came in rather awkwardly ; his face was flushed by the recent struggle with wind and rain ; his overcoat showed visible traces of the state of the weather outside.

‘It is a bad night,’ said Leresche pleasantly, pointing to a chair. ‘Take a seat. Now, what can I do for you?’

‘Well, sir,’ said the old man, raising a pair of steady, honest eyes to the surgeon’s face, ‘I want to ask you a question. Maybe I’m on a fool’s errand. I don’t know nothing about sickness and disease and such-like. I’m only a simple, unlettered sort o’ man, who’s got a heavy trouble on him, and won’t leave no stone unturned to shift it. If you’ll be so good, sir, as to look at this.’ Blair rummaged in an old pocket-book, then handed a newspaper cutting across to the surgeon. ‘It’s what gave me an idea yesterday, and I thought, I’ll go straight off to master’s doctor and see if what’ll do for one won’t do for another.’

Considerably mystified, Leresche ran his

eyes down the paper. It proved to be a brief account of a surgical operation concerning some unusually difficult but successful mode of grafting new flesh in the diseased leg of a hospital patient. He was familiar with many such cases.

‘Yes,’ he said interrogatively. ‘Now tell me what you want. Don’t be afraid of ridicule. You will never hear any from me, my man.’

‘Well, sir,’ went on Blair, rubbing one hand slowly round the crown of his hat, ‘it’s only a day or two ago that you gave a sentence worse than death to a gentleman who came here to see you. Sir, I’ve been body-servant to Mr. Connisterre for close on thirty years. Child, boy, and man, I’ve seen him through them all, and a better-hearted, honester, generous-minded man there isn’t in the three kingdoms than he. If my life could do him any good I’d give it freely; but it can’t. Seems as if I can’t do nothing for him. God Almighty only knows why

he's seen fit to crush him down like this, and he only two-and-thirty, with all his life and, so to speak, career before him. Perhaps to you professional gentlemen, used to such cases, it seems nothing, but I tell you, sir, it's well-nigh depriving *him* of reason ; and I, who'd give my blood to help him, have to stand by and watch the lad I've tended from a baby suffer an agony fifty times worse to him nor death. Can't you do something for him, sir? Can't you help me to do something? I'm only, as I told you before, an ignorant sort of fellow, but I can reason a bit. Surely if science can do one clever thing it may do another. I've read that little slip of paper over and over again, till I'm most mazed with what it says, and the thoughts that come into my head. If there's a way of taking one part of a man's body and putting it in another, isn't there a way of taking his good sight and giving it to a person who hasn't any?'

A curiously softened expression came into

the surgeon's keen face. He leaned forward and listened earnestly.

'I don't know whether what I'm asking is possible, or only foolery,' went on Adam, with a break in his voice. 'I'd give my life for my master if 't would do him any good ; I'll give my sight willingly, so be you can help me to it. Make me blind, doctor, but let him go in the light. He's young, I'm only an old wreck at the best, barring my eyesight, which is as good now as it were thirty years ago. Do this for me, sir, and I'll bless you every day of my life.'

Adam paused, and rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes.

'You don't know what he's suffering, sir,' he said, with something not unlike a sob in his throat. 'It breaks my heart to see him.'

For a moment Dr. Leresche could not speak. The stupendous love and self-sacrifice displayed by this rough man before him awed

the surgeon, as if he had suddenly been brought into the presence of a sacred, almost divine mystery, which for a moment lifted him above a world of cruel selfishness, a world where the hand of every man was upon the throat of his weaker brother, into a brighter atmosphere of love and pity.

Greater love hath no man than this, that——

‘My poor fellow,’ he said, taking Blair’s hand in a friendly clasp, ‘it’s no use—no use. Clever as we surgeons may be, in a case of this kind we are helpless as a child. No such operation as you suggest is possible. I wish from the bottom of my heart I could help your master, but I cannot—I cannot.’

‘He must go blind?’

‘He must.’

There was another silence, broken only by Adam’s heavy sighs. Then he got up; his face looked older, gray, and hopeless.

‘I am sorry to have taken up so much of

your time for nothing, sir,' he said simply. 'I know gentlemen don't like to be disturbed at night; but I can't leave my master in the daytime. You've been very patient, and I'm grateful. It was a fool's errand—a fool's errand; but drownin' men catch at straws. Good-night, sir.'

He laid a guinea on the table and turned towards the door. The surgeon picked up the money and thrust it into Blair's hand.

'No, no; keep your money, my good fellow,' he said. It is I who ought to pay you for teaching me that there are men still capable of performing an act of such noble self-sacrifice as yours would have been. Your master has lost a great deal, but he has gained what money cannot buy—a faithful friend, upon whose devotion he can rely. Tell me, has Mr. Connisterre no mother nor sister to come to him now?'

'No, sir.'

'A wife, perhaps? I always understood he was a married man.'

‘A man that’s married is a man that’s marred, leastways to my thinkin’,’ said Adam ambiguously ; ‘but he’ll not go far wrong while I’m there. Good-night, sir, and thank you again.

## CHAPTER XL

### LUX IN TENEBRIS

And I thanked God, in my fever and pain,  
That those shadows on the midnight plain  
Were gone, and could not come again !  
I struggled no longer with my doom !

*The Golden Legend.*

IT must not be supposed that a man of such energy and action as Geoffrey Connisterre would sit down under this affliction content to take the opinion of one surgeon as final. From one to another of the leading men he went with feverish restlessness, hoping against hope, and it was not until the fatal fiat had been uttered by more than two or three London oculists, and partial blindness, the terrible forerunner of his fate, was coming on, that he gave up the struggle as futile, and relapsed into a state of melancholy

apathy infinitely distressing to old Adam and Quentin Lee. In this crisis the devotion of the latter was almost pathetic. Without a word, or even a thought, of impatience Quentin cheerfully gave up all his amusements, his gay bachelor evenings, his music halls and theatres, to spend every possible moment with the man who years ago had saved him from ruin and dishonour. He had a chance now to prove his gratitude. It had been no idle boast on Quentin's part ; he would sacrifice everything, if by doing so it were possible to lighten this heavy trouble. Connisterre accepted his attention with a sort of nervous irritability. It seemed as if the man's whole disposition had changed under this blow, as if its sweetness, and generosity, and lovableness had been crushed beyond hope of return. It is only rare natures which can meet such a cross with Christian fortitude and courage. Most of us are very human, very weak, very passionate. When all that makes life bright is crushed into the dust, the sap which the

bruised reed pours forth is sometimes bitter, for time, and time alone, can bring the healing. Quentin Lee's exquisite patience and tact never failed. He knew when to be bright and when to be silent, when Connisterre would listen to some racy tale, and when he preferred to be left alone in moody reverie. Once only in these early days did Lee venture to mention Léonie, and with honest, straightforward warmth beseech Connisterre to allow him to go over to Forest Deane. His entreaties were met with a flat refusal.

‘No,’ Geoffrey had said bitterly. ‘You don’t understand, and I can never explain it to you. The break between us is final, more so now than ever. If I could not go to her when fortune smiled and I had health and strength and money to offer, am I likely to ask her now to come home and play nurse-attendant to a broken-down blind husband who would be a perpetual shadow on her young life? No; a thousand times no. Let me live my life alone. I will have

no sacrifice even from you. Go out and take your pleasures, for you can do nothing to help me. So long as Adam lives I shall manage, and when he dies I can find—some one. One can always purchase service and care if one has the pecuniary wherewithal to offer in return for these human virtues.'

The new year came in and went, spring smiled over the land, but before the silent buds were breaking into bloom, darkness had set her seal on Geoffrey Connisterre's eyes. It had been a gradual change. Each morning awaking to see a little less clearly, each evening to feel that the end was drawing nearer. Not even Quentin Lee knew of those storm-tossed vigils in the lonely hours of night as Connisterre wrestled with fierce rebellion against his fate, cursing himself, his God, his future life. His whole being was in revolt; he was, for a time at least, like a man distraught, but by degrees he relapsed into a state of dreary quiescence from which even Quentin Lee's cheerful companionship could

not arouse him. He seemed to have aged ten years in the last ten weeks; there were patches of gray in the bright brown hair, lines of pain indenting his brow. His hitherto cheery good-tempered expression had given place to a look of sullen, settled gloom, infinitely distressing to those about him. Sometimes, but not often, Lee would persuade him to go out for a walk, for Connisterre dreaded it. He was nervous, irritable, full of fears and apprehensions directly he left the shelter of his own house, but his bodily health was beginning to suffer from this long confinement indoors, and Quentin very wisely used his utmost powers of persuasion to induce him to take more exercise. One afternoon, however, early in March, Connisterre startled his friend by an imperative request to be taken into the city.

‘I have a fancy to go into Cheapside,’ he said restlessly. ‘Perhaps the noise will prevent me thinking; I shall go mad if I have no distraction. Take me there, tire

me thoroughly out, mind and body, so that I can sleep, for the nights are more hideous than the days.'

Willing to humour him, Quentin acceded, and they started out, Geoffrey clinging nervously to his companion's arm. There was a breath of coming spring in the air, and the wind, although cold, had a certain delicate freshness in it. The sky was clear, with scarcely a cloud to fleck its brightness, and the sun, powerless though it seemed to breathe much warmth into the chilly atmosphere, was sending a delicious glow of brilliance over the crowded streets. It was a day such as out in the country on some hill top watching the clouds scurrying across the sky before the stirring spring breezes, or listening to the thousand voices of nature awakening from their winter sleep, might move one to an almost passionate thanksgiving for so beautiful a world. Even here, in dear old grimy Babylon, with its myriad streets, its whirl and roar and rattle, its

human joy and human misery, and all the sins and follies of city life, the day was pleasant enough. One only needed to look upwards at the blue sky to know what the country must be like, or pause by the flower-vendors in the street with their baskets of violets and daffodils to guess at the luring beauty of the country hedgerows.

‘I suppose it *is* a lovely day,’ said Connisterre with a heavy sigh. They had roamed about the whole afternoon, threading their way lazily about the city streets, and then had drifted back to St. Paul’s Churchyard, where, after some difficulty in persuasion, Connisterre had consented to have a cup of tea.

‘Yes, it’s an uncommonly jolly day,’ returned Quentin, wondering what his companion wished to do next. ‘Quite like spring. Are you tired, old fellow?’

‘Tired! God alone knows how tired,’ said Connisterre bitterly. ‘I wish I were dead.

I wish——’ He broke off, turning his head suddenly to the left.

‘It seems as if there were a scent of violets in the air. Is it fancy? For a moment I imagined I was back in the old home.’

‘Not fancy at all. There is a girl here with a whole basket of violets. Shall I get you some?’

‘Yes, but don’t leave me though; don’t leave me at all,’ said Connisterre, clutching Lee’s arm tightly. ‘I can come with you.’

‘All right, it is only a couple of steps to the left. Would you like to go into St. Paul’s for an hour?’ added Lee, when the violets had been purchased and Connisterre was inhaling their fragrance. ‘It will be a rest before we turn home, and there is no use fagging one’s self quite out.’

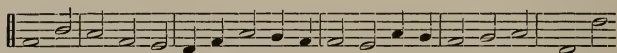
‘I want to fag myself out. I want to feel tired. My life is like that of a cat. Eating, and sleeping, and dreaming, and—yes, let us

go into the Cathedral if you like. It makes no difference to me.'

So they went into the sacred gloom of the old church, whose arms are always open ready to receive the gay and the sorrowful, the foolish and wise, the weak and the weary, as they stumble in day by day in search of rest. How many anxious hearts have been lulled to peace by her solemn hush, the tender quietness which envelopes her stately aisles, and seems almost as the whisper of God. How many troubles and griefs and perplexities have been brought here to the bosom of the great mother church, and there found a solace which the world can never give. Connisterre and Quentin Lee sat down close to one of the pillars in the central aisle. Service had already commenced and the nave was half full of people who had come in to listen to the anthem, and who were, for the most part, taking neither interest nor participation in the softly uttered prayers.

Connisterre leaned back in the seat with folded arms, his head sunk upon his breast. Quentin stared about, finding a sort of lazy interest in watching the people around him. It was only on rare occasions that he found himself in a place of worship at all. At last, with a burst of melody, the opening chords of the anthem pealed forth—

Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! What are these that are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?



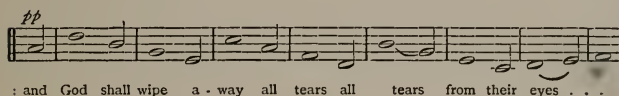
These are they which came out of great tri - bu - la - tion, and have wash-ed their robes, and

As the exquisite music swept through the silent Cathedral, Connisterre roused himself from his lethargy and leaned forward, an expression of keen enjoyment superseding the restless misery on his face. Almost it seemed as if a healing hand of peace had laid its touch gently upon his rebellious soul. The weary lines upon his forehead relaxed, a curious softening of the hard-set mouth, brought for

a moment all its old sweetness into play. His sightless eyes were closed. What vision of holiness and beauty was vouchsafed to them which was not visible to those around?

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them.

A hush, and then like the whisper of unseen angels—



It was over, but to one tortured heart in that vast Cathedral its melody had gone home and rested there, as the voice of God stilling the wordless agony and despair which had made life a hideous hell, and heaven seem like a mockery. There was a rustle, soft and subdued, then the congregation knelt down again. Connisterre sank upon his knees and hid his face. Mechanically, Quentin Lee followed his example. A sceptic at heart,

careless, unthinking, full of the faults and follies of his age, but awed by something in his surroundings, or the expression upon Geoffrey's face before he knelt, Quentin Lee's whole soul went up in a passionate entreaty to the God of whose existence hitherto he had cared or believed so little.

'Oh God, *if* there be a God,' he breathed, covering his face as he knelt there in the solemn hush, 'send this man comfort and help. *I* can do no more for him.'

Surely never had more fervent prayer ascended to the ears of the Almighty Father than this uttered by the lips of graceless Quentin Lee.

Absorbed in his own reflections, the young man hardly noticed that the service had come to an end until his companion touched him on the arm gently.

'Shall we go, now,' said Geoffrey; 'I am quite ready.'

Quentin rose and looked round at him.

What he saw written there brought a lump to his throat. There was peace upon the blind man's features, but a sadness so profound that it would have moved a woman to tears.

'Yes; let us go,' said Quentin, turning away. 'Take care, Geoff.'

In passing along the seat, carefully holding to the back of the one in front, Connisterre stumbled over the feet of an elderly man sitting at the extreme end of the pew, and recovered himself with an effort.

'Can't you look where you are going,' snapped the man irritably; 'there is room enough to pass without walking over somebody's feet.'

'Brute,' muttered Quentin beneath his breath. A spasm of pain contracted the artist's features for a second.

'I beg your pardon,' he said gently, 'I hope I have not hurt you, but—I am blind.'

'Let me ask yours,' said the other with a flush of shame. 'I did not know.'

## CHAPTER XLI

### CLOSE FRIENDS

A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

*Proverbs.*

WHEN Quentin Lee was sitting before the study fire that same evening, a cigar between his teeth, Connisterre came in. He entered with his usual slow, careful step, feeling his way from chair to chair as if dreading a stumble, for it was curious how as yet, at all events, he had gained none of that instinctive confidence or keen judgment of locality with which one is accustomed to associate the blind. He was nervous to a painful degree, dependent upon the offices of those around him, and although he did, and persisted in going about the house alone, it was with halting gait and timid step. Quentin jumped

up and put out a guiding hand to lead him to the sofa.

‘It’s vilely cold,’ was his first original remark as he sat down beside Connisterre and passed him a pipe. ‘You’ll have a smoke?’

‘I think so—yes.’ Geoffrey filled the pipe, then sat with it unlighted in his fingers.

‘I have behaved like a brute to you all,’ he said, laying his hand upon Quentin’s shoulder.

‘My dear fellow, what do you mean?’

‘Like a brute,’ went on Connisterre, as if he had not heard the interruption. ‘I have been down in hell for the last few weeks, but it was a hell that I made for myself. Have you ever seen a picture of yourself as you ought to be, and one as you really are? It is enough to make a man shudder.’ Connisterre pushed the hair from his forehead with a weary gesture.

‘I lost my hold on everything,’ he said dreamily—‘everything. I was like a drown-

ing man sucked down in a whirlpool, with the wreckage of everything he valued strewn the water above him, and the awful clamour of the storm in his ears. I put out my hands, but there seemed nothing to grasp. I could only cry, and curse, and choke, and pray for the end to come. I think the devil had hold of me. The plank was there, if I had chosen to look for it. I only needed to let myself go instead of buffeting fate.'

'Dear old man, don't say any more,' returned Lee affectionately, taking that strong supple hand which would never again put brush to canvas.

'I *must* say more. Quentin, one needs no greater hell than one can make here on earth; but, thank God, I have come out of it into daylight again. That anthem was a revelation to me this afternoon—a direct message from Heaven. I've been an irreligious dog all my life, eaten up with pride and self-glory. I can't talk about such

things, but—this life is not all. I am going to try and live it out here cheerfully if I can. Dear lad, you have been an angel of patience, and I have repaid you with a base ingratitude, which a dog would not have shown. No, don't speak,' as Lee interrupted with a hasty word of remonstrance. 'Of course, I know what you will say—that I am a saint under my affliction; that it was too heavy for poor, weak human nature to bear without repining; that I was only as many another; but I know better. It was my beastly pride in myself, my genius, my success, my work. I meant to do so much to achieve such renown, and then—this came. Into the depths. God! You can never realise the hideous horror of it all. The blasphemy and rebellion and hate in my soul. I shudder when I think of it; but there—I have exorcised my demon—let him rest. I can't understand yet why this trial has come to me, or even think there is some wise providence in it; but—I am content to take it now and

sit quietly down. You'll have to help me, Quentin, and, if sometimes I am a brute as formerly, still you will know I am trying. Just have patience. I will do my best not to be a nuisance, but it isn't easy—no, it isn't easy.'

The last words were almost in a whisper ; but a moment later he roused himself and laughed—a weary, pathetic laugh, which had little mirth in it.

'Poor old man,' he said, pressing Quentin's arm. 'I don't believe you have seen a music-hall or a ballet-dancer for weeks. Well, we can change all that. You shall chaperon me to places of amusement, and I will try to see with your eyes ; only, don't take undue advantage of my ignorance and lead me into frivolities which are not permissible, for I shall be quite at your mercy. One cannot be too particular in these degenerate days, so perhaps it will be better to begin with a respectable concert instead of launching out straight away to the Tivoli or the Oxford.'

Connisterre was making an effort to speak jokingly, but a moment later he relapsed into silence again, and as Quentin's further remarks met with no response he slipped away to fetch his violin, for sometimes in the evening Connisterre would listen to it with a show of interest. He was some few minutes away hunting for a piece of music which he had mislaid. When he returned Geoffrey was still in the same position, but he had in his hand a portrait of Léonie, which he was in the habit of carrying about with him. Quentin drew back ; he felt like an intruder into some sacred privacy. It was pitiful to note the way in which the blind man's fingers travelled over the raised surface of the photograph, as if he could by touch recall the pictured features on which his eyes would never again rest, but he put it down at last, and sighed. Oh ! the weary, weary pathos in that sigh.

‘My little wife, my little wife!’ he murmured half aloud as he picked up the photograph again and pressed it to his lips.

‘If you only knew how I am hungering for you; how all my heart goes out to you. I think—perhaps you would forgive all and come to me. Anything—anything but this awful loneliness.’

Softly as he had come, Quentin Lee went away again up to his room. It was all in darkness, but he made no attempt to seek a light. He only wanted to be alone and think.

‘Yes,’ he said aloud, banging his hand upon the table. ‘I don’t care a hang for that fooling old adage about not interfering between man and wife. If the world piled up a heap of proverbs, and warnings, and truisms, as high as the dome of St. Paul’s, I’ll go straight through them as sure as my name is Quentin Lee. She shall be made to come back to him. The best I can ever do seems that it won’t fill *her* place; so I’m off to Forest Deane to-morrow. Hard words don’t hurt, and if I am not successful Connisterre need never know.

## CHAPTER XLII

### HE HAS NEED OF YOU

But here is one who loves you as of old  
With more exceeding passion than of old.

TENNYSON.

IN the library at Manor House, a cheerful room looking out upon the great Derbyshire hills, Léonie Connisterre was sitting alone. It was early in the afternoon, and Lady Paget as usual had sought the seclusion of her own room for her accustomed siesta. It was quiet both in the house and out, for a spell of damp, dreary weather had superseded the spring-like beauty of the last few days, and driven to the shelter of home all who had no urgent or pressing need to venture out. The early foliage, chilled by this inclement change, seemed to have shrunk into

its brown coat again ; there was a depressing drip, drip of rain upon the gravel sweep, a melancholy sougning of the wind as it swelled and moaned and sobbed fitfully amongst the trees. Léonie had some fancy work upon her knee, but her hands lay idly above it. She was in a lazy mood, wistful neither to work nor read.

‘It is much pleasanter to be in here than there,’ she said with a little shiver, looking from the dreary prospect outside to the cheerfully crackling fire before which she was lounging in luxurious comfort. ‘I used to be so fond of going out in all weathers—now I hate the rain and the wind. I suppose that it is advancing age.’

She gave a little laugh, and laid her hand fondly upon the head of the old deerhound at her feet.

‘How does it feel to be very old, Bruin?’ she went on, looking down into the big brown eyes dim with weight of years. ‘To grow weak, and wheezy, and languid, only

longing for the end—and rest. We must all come to it one day—some of us sooner than others. I feel so very old—now, and life is dreary even for me, dear Bruin.’

The last six months had wrought a great change in Léonie. She had leapt from girl to womanhood, into a world of pain and disappointment; but, as the crushing of wood-ruff brings out all its hidden sweetness, so the stress of human passion and suffering had separated the pure gold from the alloy of baser metal in Léonie’s undisciplined nature.

Bruin responded with a yawn, laying his silken head upon her knee, and then—for the fire was very comforting, and the house still as a grave—mistress and dog settled down into a contented slumber. Half an hour passed on, and still that pretty picture by the fire remained undisturbed. The rain-drops peeping in at the long windows hushed their noisy patter, even the wind sank into a solemn whisper. Then at last the silence was broken by a noisy ringing of the bell,

and a crunching of wheels and hoofs upon the gravel outside. Léonie awakened with a start. Visitors to Manor Hall were not very numerous, now that Monica was married and away.

‘I do not know who that can be, Bruin,’ she said, as the deerhound gave a low growl and stiffened into an attitude of attention. ‘It is a very noisy visitor at all events.’

A minute later Thomas came into the room, a deprecating expression upon his face. Perhaps he expected to find her still asleep.

‘There is a gentleman to see you, please, m’m,’ he said in a subdued voice. ‘Mr. Quentin Lee.’

As he uttered the name, Léonie coloured nervously, and her fingers tightened upon Bruin’s collar. A prevision of evil had seized her.

‘Show Mr. Lee in here, Thomas,’ she said, half-rising in her chair.

Her heart was beating to suffocation. What did this visit portend? Was Geoffrey ill—in trouble?

Quentin came in embarrassed and ill at ease. Now that the interview for which he had come was so near at hand he shrank from it. The whole journey from London had been spent in mentally rehearsing the speech in which he must convey to Léonie the news of her husband's misfortune, but now that he was actually in her presence he could find no words to frame it. He was stammering and colouring like a school-boy. All his anger, impatience, and resentment against her was swept away at the sight of that wistful little face.

'You must have had a very unpleasant journey,' Léonie said, putting out a hand in welcome. 'We seem to have gone back into winter all at once. Lady Paget will be very glad to see you.' Then she paused and looked at him with an unspoken question in her eyes.

'Mrs. Connisterre, my visit is to you, not to Lady Paget,' said Quentin, taking the offered chair, the colour deepening in his

cheeks. 'I don't know that I can do any good; I may be presumptuous in even fancying that my intermediation will be of use. I feel it is an intrusion—— of course, I don't know the circumstances of the case, but—— will you give me a patient hearing? Perhaps I ought at the onset to tell you that Mr. Connisterre is ignorant of my visit.'

'I think it will be wiser for you not to say any more,' interrupted Léonie with an added reserve in her manner. 'I can guess something of your reason for coming, but—we will not discuss it.'

'At the risk of you considering me unwarrantably impertinent I must say what is in my mind,' returned Quentin Lee steadily. 'You know that I am still living with your husband, Mrs. Connisterre?'

'I suppose so.'

A pause.

'You have not heard anything about him lately?' went on Quentin with evident reluctance.

Léonie looked up, startled by the gravity of the young man's voice.

'There is some bad news to tell me,' she said breathlessly. 'Is it not so?'

'Bad in one sense; yes. Look here, Léonie,' Quentin had dropped his formality. He was eager, impetuous, boyishly anxious to have the whole story out. 'I know nothing about the cause of this estrangement between you; Geoffrey has never discussed it with me, and I am here now simply as *his* friend to see if there is no possible way of ending it.'

'You say that you have come without his sanction,' said Léonie bitterly. 'Is he likely to thank you for it?'

'If I am successful, yes; if not—well, he need never know I came. No man ever wanted his wife more desperately than Geoffrey does now, and will to the last hour of his life. I cannot fill your place; nobody can. He is too proud to ask you to come back; but I am daring to do so for his sake.'

‘You are keeping something back from me!’ Léonie came across to him and put out her hands entreatingly. Every vestige of colour had left her cheeks and lips. ‘You would not have dared to come without some urgent reason! Tell me! Is he ill?’

Tell her? How? Last night in his passion and excitement it had seemed so easy. Now he felt like a brute. In what words must he reveal the truth?’

Lee’s hesitation increased Léonie’s fears. Pride, resentment, dignity fled away before this rush of new-born apprehension; wifely love, dormant so long, had awakened at the first whisper of danger to her husband. She forgot their quarrel, the insult, the tacit separation. She only realised that Geoffrey was in trouble and she had left him.

‘I insist upon knowing,’ she exclaimed, vainly trying to steady her voice. ‘Do not keep me any longer in suspense. He is ill; he is dying; he—oh, it *cannot be, it cannot—*’

‘No, no, no,’ said Quentin, taking her

hands in a kindly clasp, startled by the girl's emotion. 'He is well in bodily health, at least—I mean—— Listen, there are some misfortunes which leave us our health but darken life. Be brave, Mrs. Connisterre, you will need all your courage; how I wish some one else could tell you. I am such a blunt-spoken idiot, but—it is this way. Some weeks ago your husband consulted an oculist. His eyes had been giving him trouble. We have taken the best advice in London, but nothing can be done. You know I would have given my life for him. He wants you now—because he is—he is blind.'

'*Blind!*' she wailed, looking at Quentin with dazed horror-stricken eyes. 'Blind! oh, it can't be true, it can't be true! My darling, my darling!' She gave a little gasp, moved away with uncertain step, and then reeled forward. Quentin caught her in his arms.

'I never dreamed she cared for him like this,' he muttered, looking down at the girl's

unconscious face pillowed against his shoulder. 'What an enigma a woman is.'

He put her gently down on the sofa, and then stood still wondering a little what to do next. He did not like to arouse the curiosity of the servants by ringing for assistance, and yet his experience of fainting women had been so limited that he was ignorant as a baby how to set about restoring the girl to consciousness. Suddenly his glance fell upon a bottle of lavender salts standing in a little box on the table near which Léonie had been sitting.

'What a piece of luck,' he muttered, taking out the stopper. 'Well, they are strong enough, that is one comfort. Poor little soul, how deathly white she looks, and what a horrid bungle I must have made of the whole affair.'

In a few minutes Quentin had the satisfaction of seeing the big dark eyes uncloze and look up at him in puzzled bewilderment. It was only for a second. The next, full realisation of the awful truth which he had blurted out dawned upon her, and she turned away,

burying her face in the pillow with a little moan.

‘Tell me all about it,’ she whispered.

So Quentin told her faithfully the best and worst, touching only lightly upon Connisterre’s state of melancholia.

‘And nobody ever wrote to me,’ she said with a whole world of reproach in her voice. ‘You let him suffer and I never knew.’

‘Geoffrey would not allow me to write. He said he could never ask you to give up your life and play nurse to a helpless man. It was only last night that I determined to come, let the consequences be what they might. Mrs. Connisterre, will you return to him?’

‘Do you think he wishes it?’ she said, nervously interlacing her fingers together. ‘If I go—he may not want me—he may be angry.’

‘Could you have seen him as I saw him with your photograph to his lips; could you have heard what—— But there, never let

him know it,' broke off Quentin in a husky voice. 'It was sacrilege to listen; only I think—if I were you——'

Léonie stood up. There was a soft, beautiful, wholly tender look in her eyes. Her lips were quivering, but there was a smile within the tears.

'Yes,' she said, while the delicate colour dyed her cheeks like roses.' You shall take me back to him, Quentin. Now—to-night.'

## CHAPTER XLIII

### FOR BETTER OR WORSE

Shalt show us how divine a thing  
A woman may be made.

WORDSWORTH.

‘MR. LEE has not returned yet?’

‘No, sir. I can’t think what be keeping him so late.’

‘He did not say where he was going?’

‘He just said he would be out of town for a few hours. Maybe he’s missed his train. Better go to bed, Mr. Geoffrey, for it’s lonesome waiting for folk to turn up.’

‘No, I don’t care to go just yet,’ said Connisterre, leaning back again in his chair.

‘What time is it, Adam?’

‘Half-past eleven, sir.’

‘Come again in about an hour. The

nights seem so long when one goes to bed early.'

'Shall I read the paper to you a bit,' asked Adam, with a pathetic anxiety to while away the tedium of waiting.

'No, I would rather be quiet, thanks. I daresay Mr. Lee will be hungry when he comes in, so see that supper is ready for him, Adam. He can have it in here.'

Adam went out, and Connisterre sat on before the fire thinking how lonely it was. His thoughts were with his girl-wife. He had a passionate longing to have her with him to-night, to feel the touch of her velvety cheek against his own, the clasp of her little hands. He was hungering for her with a hunger which could never be satisfied now, for she was but to him a memory—a part of the old life which was closed to him for ever. He turned his head sharply. Was it fancy, or had the door quietly opened?

'Is that you, Quentin?' he asked.

There was no reply.

‘I am full of fancies to-night,’ he said dreamily, and then, taking his pipe from his coat pocket, he felt along the table for his tobacco-pouch. It was not there. He rose, moved hesitatingly across to the mantel-shelf. No, not there either. Then he came back and felt again over the surface of the table. How helpless he seemed, groping there in the dark like a blind puppy. Not even this simple thing could he do for himself. He must ring for Adam, but in the irritation and perplexity of the moment he had lost his bearings. Where *was* the bell? He moved back again feeling his way across the room by the chairs until his ankle came sharply in contact with something hard. The pain for a moment was exquisite. He sat down by the table and leaned his head upon it.

‘Oh God,’ he groaned. ‘It is too hard for me. Let me die.’

Then there came a little rush across the floor, two soft arms about his neck, a cheek

wet with tears was pressed against his own.

‘Geoffrey, don’t ; don’t say that,’ sobbed Léonie, clinging tightly to him. ‘You must not die. I will be sight to you—everything, if you will only let me. You shall never feel lonely again. Only love me, Geoffrey—only say you want to have me with you, my poor boy. Oh, why did they not tell me sooner?’

‘Léonie! my little wife is it you?’ His arms were round her in a passionate embrace, his eager lips seeking hers, his hand caressing her uplifted face. For the moment all was forgotten save that he held her in his arms again, and the shadows of the past had flown away.

There was a long, long silence.

‘Léonie,’ Connisterre whispered. ‘If I could not make you happy when the world went well with me, when I had health, and riches, and gaiety to offer you, how can I make you happy now—ruined, blind, helpless, a care to myself, a nuisance to——’

‘Hush!’ she said, stopping his words with her kisses. ‘So long as I have you, Geoffrey, I want nothing else. I loved you when you had everything in the world to make you happy and had no need of me. I love you now ten thousand times more when you are lonely and in trouble, because—you cannot do without me. Geoffrey, Geoffrey, I shall never leave you again. Nobody shall come between us any more.’

‘Nobody ever came between us,’ he whispered. ‘Nothing but my own folly, and stupidity, and neglect. Have you quite forgiven me, sweetheart? Is there no resentment still in your heart? I don’t deserve this love and sacrifice—for it *is* a sacrifice. Léonie, you don’t realise what it means. I am so helpless, such a care, such——’

‘You are my husband,’ she said steadily. ‘Nobody else has the right to care for you, and help, and feel for you as I have. There is nothing to forgive—no shadow between us now, Geoffrey.’ She put up her hand and

stroked his hair. 'Oh, my darling,' she said with a catch in her voice; 'how you must have suffered? Your face tells me, the gray in your hair, the lines on your forehead; but I will make it all up to you. Have you wanted me so much? were you really longing for me to come back to you?'

'Every day, every hour, nay, every moment,' he said passionately; 'and now ——' The wail in his strong young voice brought the hot tears to Léonie's eyes. 'Now that you are come back to me, I cannot see you, can never see your face again. How am I to bear it? oh, my little girl, you will have to be so much to me—so much!'

And so, as sometimes happens, there sprang up out of the depths of black despair and bitter suffering, the white flower of love and human sympathy—that flower which in prosperity and the world's gay sunshine blooms often but too faintly. Almost it seems as if only pain and anguish can press

out the hidden fragrance, as if joy and gladness dulled its beauty and brought a tinge of fading to its petals. But let the clouds grow darker, and then is seen against the gloomy background the flower once more in all its purity and sweetness.

It must not be supposed that even though surrounded by wifely love and the devotion of friends, Connisterre would find his cross an easy one to carry, or his path a bed of roses. To demand this is asking too much of weak human nature. Repining would come, fierce revolt against his fate, all a strong man's despair at the ruthless cutting short of ambitious hopes, days of despondency, dread, and mental agony ; but step by step he could struggle on, taking such happiness and rays of brightness as filtered into his darkened life, aided in the fight by those who had made his grief their own, and whose love and care would never fail.

THE END

*Printed by R. & R. CLARK, Edinburgh.*







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